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Version: Version of Record

Link(s) to article on publisher's website:

<http://dx.doi.org/doi:10.21954/ou.ro.00010463>

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AN ANALYSIS OF NIETZSCHE'S CONCEPTION OF DECADENCE

David Hurrell

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*A thesis submitted for the qualification of PhD in Philosophy, April 2019, The
Open University.*

David Hurrell

Abstract

Nietzsche's readership often assumes that what is meant by the term 'decadence' is simply a condition of moral and cultural decline. This study argues that Nietzsche's conception amounts to a more complex hypothesis. While Nietzsche gives no formal analysis of decadence, Chapter 1 provides an initial discussion of the 'formulae' and 'recipes' for decadence that Nietzsche mentions. It emerges that decadence denotes a disunity within a self and a culture, and the dynamic relationship between the two. Moreover, Nietzsche describes decadence as a physiological condition with psychological consequences that inclines those who suffer from it to be against life. An investigation of the method Nietzsche uses to unmask decadence's workings in Chapter 2 reveals that he arrives at his 'decadence hypothesis' by reasoning backwards from the assumption that cultural values stem from individuals' physiological and psychological weaknesses. Central to his hypothesis is that adoption and proliferation of decadent values inhibit and further weaken decadent lives. An initial critical assessment shows that Nietzsche's hypothesis is possibly self-referential, incomplete, and cannot be seen as established as the best explanation. Chapter 3 elucidates in more detail the underlying causes of decadence as a process of physiological corruption of humanity by the forces of civilization that suppress an individual's powers. Decadence emerges as possibly self-reinforcing, self-replicating, and self-propagating. Since Nietzsche and commentators frequently use the term 'decadence' to describe also the subsequent psychological expressions of decadence, Chapter 4 presents an analysis of the effects, and then discusses a number of exemplar decadents (Chapters 5-8) to demonstrate a discernible set of common attributes: psychological, epistemological, and metaphysical expressions of weakness underpin decadence's most important attribute, *i.e.*, restricted agency and failure to realize an authentic self. Chapters 9 and 10 offer further support for a physiological reading of decadence and provide a summary of my findings.

Acknowledgements

I should like to thank most warmly my primary supervisor, Dr Manuel Dries, for his incisive, challenging feedback and generous, encouraging support. This research was supported by a full Studentship awarded by the Consortium for the Humanities and the Arts South-East England (CHASE), and funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC).

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Abbreviations

The following abbreviations are used for citations of Nietzsche's writings, and are then associated with an applicable translated edition, or in the case of *KGB* and *KSA*, with the original German edition, as cited in the Bibliography at the end of this work. These abbreviations generally conform to the *de facto* standard used by *The Journal of Nietzsche Studies*, but with a few required additions.

A: *The Anti-Christ*, Nietzsche (2005).

AOM: *Assorted Opinions and Maxims*, Nietzsche (1996a).

BGE: *Beyond Good and Evil*, Nietzsche (2002).

BT: *The Birth of Tragedy*, Nietzsche (1999a).

CW: *The Case of Wagner*, Nietzsche (2005).

D: *Daybreak*, Nietzsche (1997b).

DS: *David Strauss, the Confessor and the Writer*, Nietzsche (1997a).

EH: *Ecce Homo* (sections abbreviated: 'Wise', 'Clever', 'Books', 'Destiny'; abbreviations for titles discussed in 'Books' are indicated instead of 'Books' where relevant), Nietzsche (2005).

GM: *On the Genealogy of Morality*, Nietzsche (2007).

GS: *The Gay Science*, Nietzsche (2001).

HH: *Human, All Too Human*, Nietzsche (1996a).

KGB: *Briefwechsel. Kritische Gesamtausgabe*, Nietzsche (1975-2003).

KSA: *Kritische Studienausgabe*, Nietzsche (1999b).

LR: *Lectures on Rhetoric*, Nietzsche (1989).

- MT: My Own Translation (as a published one is not available).
- NCW: *Nietzsche Contra Wagner*, Nietzsche (2005).
- RWB: *Richard Wagner in Bayreuth*, Nietzsche (1997a).
- SE: *Schopenhauer as Educator*, Nietzsche (1997a).
- SL: *Selected Letters of Friedrich Nietzsche*, Nietzsche (1996b).
- TI: *Twilight of the Idols* (sections abbreviated: 'Maxims', 'Socrates', 'Reason', 'World', 'Morality', 'Errors,' Improvers, 'Germans', 'Skirmishes', 'Ancients', 'Hammer'), Nietzsche (2005).
- TL: *On Truth and Lies in an Extra-Moral Sense*, Nietzsche (1999a).
- WEN: *Writings from the Early Notebooks*, Nietzsche (2009).
- WLN: *Writings from the Late Notebooks*, Nietzsche (2003).
- WP: *The Will to Power*, Nietzsche (1968).
- WS: *The Wanderer and His Shadow*, Nietzsche (1996a).
- Z: *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* (references list the part number, an abbreviated chapter title followed by the relevant section number when applicable), Nietzsche (2006).

Introduction

In 1888, the final year of his sanity, Nietzsche wrote: “In fact the thing I have been most deeply occupied with is the problem of decadence, – I have had my reasons for this.”¹ The importance of the concept of decadence to him is thereby clearly stated, but what does Nietzsche mean by it? Nietzsche presents no formal analysis of decadence and at best offers a kind of incomplete theory. The primary bearers of decadence are individuals and cultures, but Nietzsche often uses the term to describe a certain perspective as well as the cultural entities founded upon it, such as philosophies, religions, moralities, scientific theories and works of art, that are created by decadents and which decadence-prone individuals find seductive. In the literal sense, from the Latin *de-cadere*, decadence refers to the action of ‘falling down’. In its most common figurative use it denotes decay or decline from a previous state of vitality, and an instinctive impulse towards disintegration or degeneration. One can even interpret it musically as a ‘de-cadence’, to mean a loss of rhythm, and apply it metaphorically to mean out of step with life.² Decay, decline, and degeneration, are all terms with a similar meaning to decadence that are used in Nietzsche’s published writings prior to those of 1888 when his use of the term ‘decadence’ begins in earnest. As we shall see, for Nietzsche, decadence may explain the decay and moral decline but it is not synonymous or interchangeable with those terms. As I will show, it is most akin to degeneration.³ For Nietzsche, the concept of degeneration is particularly applicable to the faltering state of the humanity of modernity, which he presents as a consequence of a life-inhibiting, physiological condition with psychological consequences.⁴ Indeed, I will claim that it is this physiological condition of an internal disunity that he more generally equates with term ‘decadence’. Nietzsche regards humanity’s underlying physiological disorder as the basis

¹ CW: Preface.

² Benson (2008), p. 8.

³ *Entartung* and *Degenerescenz* are both usually translated as degeneration. Whilst the former appears throughout Nietzsche’s oeuvre, the latter is only used from 1888. *Verfall* is usually translated as decay, but sometimes as decline. Whereas *Niedergang* is more normally used for the decline, its usage only becomes prevalent from around 1887. *Corruption* and *Verderbniss* are both usually translated as corruption, although the latter may be taken to mean destruction, spoiling or rotting. The frequency of both these terms increases from around 1886.

⁴ KSA: 13:17[6] = WP: 44. Cf., KSA: 13:15[10] = WP: 851.

for assorted cultural expressions that come to embody life-inhibiting values.⁵ These values further impede the flourishing of individuals and their cultures. Some commentators have a tendency to overlook or downplay⁶ what Nietzsche often calls the physiological basis of decadence, and focus primarily on decadence as a cultural phenomenon that turns people against life. While the latter is clearly important, I shall argue that a proper grasp of what Nietzsche sees as the physiological basis of decadence is crucial for a full understanding of his conception.

The original aims of this thesis were twofold: first, to examine what exactly Nietzsche means by decadence; and secondly, to explore how decadence can be understood as an organizing principle and significant philosophical term in his last five published texts: *The Case of Wagner*, *Twilight of the Idols*, *Nietzsche Contra Wagner*, *The Anti-Christ*, and *Ecce Homo*. In these works – all written in 1888 and published in this order – Nietzsche always uses the French spelling of *décadence* and *décadent[s]*,⁷ but never the German *Dekadenz* (nor *Dekadent[s]*),⁸ and mentions decadence or its cognates over 80 times.⁹ This frequency is far more than any of his more celebrated conceptions such as the Overhuman (*Übermensch*), eternal recurrence, or nihilism.¹⁰ However, my working hypothesis soon became that decadence is clearly discernible in some of his published works prior to these writings from 1888, but where the terms ‘decadence’ and ‘decadent[s]’ are absent. Indeed, where and when exactly the conception of decadence first arises in Nietzsche’s oeuvre became an important question for me. Throughout, I will refer to an *explicit discussion* of decadence when the terms ‘decadence’ and ‘decadent[s]’ are used. This period is preceded by one where an *implicit discussion* is perceptible, and, although the terms are *not* yet used, the general conception is either clearly discernible or noticeably emerging as a number of key components are apparent. Finally,

⁵ See Chapter 1.3.

⁶ Weir (2018) and Burnham (2015), respectively: see Chapter 1.5.

⁷ For simplicity’s sake, I will henceforth use the English equivalent.

⁸ In the original German notebooks and correspondence, Nietzsche uses the German *Dekadenz* and the heading *décad<ence>* twice each, *antidécadence* once, plus *décadent* also once, and *decadence* six times.

⁹ I.e.: *décadence/décadent/décadents* = [83]: *CW*: 8/5/3 = [16], *TI*: 11/8/3 = [22], *NCW*: 1/1/1 = [3], *A*: 14/4/2 = [20] & *EH*: 11/8/3 = [22].

¹⁰ There are approximately 300 more references in his notebooks and correspondence, making a grand total of over 380. *Übermensch* for example, is mentioned less than 40 times in all his writings.

prior to this implicit discussion, there is an even earlier and longer period where, although there is little or no evidence of a substantial conception of decadence, there is the formulation or presentation of important themes or ideas that are later connected to decadence in a substantial way. In light of the above, my original assumption that an analysis of decadence could be confined to the period of his final five published works, had to be revised. I subsequently modified my second aim, which now became an investigation of how decadence functions more broadly as an organizing principle and significant philosophical term. Therefore, this thesis references the majority of Nietzsche's published oeuvre in some way or other, but it is specifically dependent on those works written from approximately mid-1885 onwards, as they patently show either an implicit or an explicit discussion of decadence.

Another considerable source of material that is pertinent to unravelling the emergence of the conception of decadence is the contents of Nietzsche's unpublished notebooks (the *Nachlass*), and to a much lesser degree his correspondence (*Briefwechsel*). Although Nietzsche uses the term 'decadence' in one of these notebooks from late 1876/early 1877,¹¹ it is often believed that reading Paul Bourget's essay on Charles Baudelaire¹² from his 'Essays in Contemporary Psychology' (*Essais de psychologie contemporaine*) in the winter of 1883, inspired him to think about the term, and begin to work out his own conception of decadence.¹³ However, the next mention of the term is in a notebook entry from the spring of 1884,¹⁴ and then it only appears a few more times until its steady usage begins from November 1887. In fact, it would appear that reading the French psychiatrist Charles Féré's 1888 work 'Degeneration and Criminality' (*Dégénérescence et criminalité*) – subtitled 'A Physiological Essay' (*Essai physiologique*) – developed Nietzsche's physiological understanding of

¹¹ Referring to *Don Quixote*, he speaks of "the decadence of Spanish culture." (die Decadence der spanischen Culture), KSA: 8:23[140] = MT.

¹² Especially the section entitled 'Theory of Decadence'.

¹³ Bourget is first mentioned in a notebook entry from 1883/1884, KSA: 10:24[6], whilst 11:43[2] from 1885 reads like an early sketch of the workings of decadence. One of Nietzsche's last notebook entries portrays Bourget as having independently arrived at a similar position to his own rather than acknowledging Bourget's influence: "Paul Bourget, who by far came closest to me by himself – – –", (Paul Bourget, der bei weitem am meisten von sich aus mir nahe gekommen ist – – –), KSA: 13:25[9] = MT.

¹⁴ KSA: 11:25[141]; although 10:16[5] uses the term, it was written in 1888 and not 1883.

decadence, such that the relevance of Bourget's influence then became more pronounced only later. It is very likely that both informed Nietzsche's thinking on decadence, but that he ultimately formulated his own conception, which then became the central theme in his subsequent writings of 1888.¹⁵

There is therefore, a need to briefly outline how I will use Nietzsche's *Nachlass* as sources in understanding his conception of decadence. Bernd Magnus has made a useful distinction between two broad types of Nietzsche scholars. On the one hand there are 'lumpers' who regard the use of Nietzsche's *Nachlass* as unproblematic despite its inherently tentative nature, and on the other 'splitters', who make a sharp distinction between the published and unpublished writings.¹⁶ In fact, any discussion of decadence is an interesting example of how to approach this divide, because in his published works decadence is presented essentially as a pre-established phenomenon. Nietzsche therefore makes few concessions to the reader with regard to this conception and he does not clearly and comprehensively elucidate what exactly he means by it, nor how the phenomenon functions in any specific detail. He does, however, do this to a greater degree – but in a highly fragmented manner – in his notebooks, where one can discern his attempts to construct a theory and methodology pertaining to it. However, we should first note that caution is required when referring to Nietzsche's 'theory of decadence', as the only time he uses such terminology is in an early 1888 notebook entry referring to a chapter heading for the second part of an abortive book.¹⁷ As I will show in Chapter 3.3.1, one of the key underlying causes of decadence is stated in a notebook entry but only obliquely alluded to in the published works. Therefore, I do frequently refer to his notebooks and employ them to elucidate interpretive issues found within the published

¹⁵ Moore (2002a), pp. 126-127. Although Brobjer (2008) does not discuss Féré, he is mentioned three times in Nietzsche's notebooks: KSA: 13:14[119], 13:14[172] & 13:15[37], with the last two entries referencing page numbers of Féré's book.

¹⁶ Magnus (1986), pp. 82-83.

¹⁷ "Theory of decadence. Second Part." (*Theorie der décadence. Zweiter Theil.*), KSA: 13:14[77] = MT. A notebook entry from mid-1888 also refers to a related "Theory of exhaustion", KSA: 13:16[53] = WP: 50. See Chapter 3.2.3. Nietzsche appears to brand Jesus as a decadent – see Chapter 5.1 – and another entry from late 1887 is entitled: "My theory of the Jesus type." (*Meine Theorie vom Typus Jesu.*), KSA: 13:11[378] = MT. See Chapter 4.2.2.

writings. Yet at the same time, I strive to avoid basing any of my interpretive claims of Nietzsche's positions solely on the evidence of his unpublished writings.

I will conclude this general introduction by briefly outlining how this study is structured. As Nietzsche's conception of decadence is a difficult one to grasp, in Chapter 1 I give a brief initial analysis of Nietzsche's conception of decadence, and examine some of the general properties that constitute a decadent self, using the 'formulae', 'recipes' and an analogy for decadence that he mentions in his published writings from 1888. I also take a first look at the dynamic relationship between a decadent self and a decadent culture, and briefly examine two contrasting ways that this is portrayed in the secondary literature. The findings drawn from this initial analysis are then expanded upon in subsequent chapters. In Chapter 2 I examine the methods and techniques that Nietzsche uses to detect and explain the functioning of the phenomenon of decadence. I argue that the 'theory' of decadence he presents is based on the hypothesis that the life-inhibiting values that individuals create or adopt, are symptomatic of a wish to escape the suffering caused by an underlying, weakening physiological disorder. Nietzsche's hypothesis is generated by using a type of inference profitably compared to a medical diagnosis. In Chapter 3 I discuss the causes of decadence, which I argue can be ascribed to a combination of physiological and cultural factors that are sometimes only implicitly alluded to by Nietzsche. The combination of these factors can then be used to understand the causal process of decadence at the level of the individual, and also at the level of culture. In Chapter 4 I discuss the effects of decadence which, unlike the causes, are more numerous and explicitly stated. Focusing on the most important effects yields a set of four key attributes of weakness pertaining to a decadent. These four attributes provide the criteria that are used in Chapters 5 to 8, to identify a range of exemplar decadents, who are then used as 'case histories' to tease out the different expressions of decadence that Nietzsche detects across both the arts and sciences. Finally, in Chapter 9 I formulate a hypothesis that decadence is best understood as possibly a self-enforcing, self-replicating and self-propagating phenomenon. I conclude by presenting

Nietzsche's views on the possibilities and likelihood of combatting the phenomenon of decadence, which also demonstrates the importance of the physiological aspect.

I will begin then by providing an introductory overview of Nietzsche's conception of decadence that begins with a brief examination of its fundamental property – disunity.

PART I: UNRAVELLING DECADENCE

Chapter 1: An Outline of Decadence

1.1 Introduction

This chapter's overall aim is threefold. Firstly, to provide a general analysis of Nietzsche's conception of decadence as applied to both individuals and cultures by focusing on what appears to be its conceptual underlying structure. Secondly, to examine in particular what general properties constitute a decadent self for Nietzsche using the 'formulae', 'recipes' and an analogy for decadence that he mentions in his later works. Thirdly, to then take this analysis and briefly sketch out the dynamic relationship between a decadent self and a decadent culture. I will start then by sketching a conceptual structure of decadence.

1.2 Disunity as the Hallmark of Decadence

Nietzsche offers a brief exposition of the concept of decadence that begins with reference to a decadent style in literature¹ which he appropriated from the French novelist and critic Paul Bourget.² By arguing from analogy, he extends the discussion from the realm of aesthetics to cover three other domains; morality, politics and physiology:

For the moment I am only going to look at the question of *style*. – What is the hallmark of all *literary* decadence? The fact that life does not reside in the totality any more. The word becomes sovereign and jumps out of the sentence, the sentence reaches out and blots out the meaning of the page, the page comes to life at the expense of the whole – the whole is not whole any more. But this is the image of every decadent style: there is always an anarchy of the atom, disintegration of the will, 'freedom of the individual', morally speaking, – or, expanded into a political theory, '*equal* rights for all'. Life, *equal* vitality, the vibration and exuberance of life pushed back into the smallest structures, all the rest *impoverished* of life.

¹ CW: 7.

² See Gogroff-Voorhees (1999), p. 159. Bourget further describes decadence as a process in which parts of an organism, such as language or a community, become independent and eventually leads to a state of anarchy. See Moore (2002a), pp. 120-121.

Paralysis everywhere, exhaustion, numbness or hostility and chaos: both becoming increasingly obvious the higher you climb in the forms of organization. The whole does not live at all any more: it is cobbled together, calculated, synthetic, an artifact. —³

Decadence within a cultural entity, an entire culture or indeed within an individual then appears to be as a result of internal disunity. Nietzsche seems to regard the individual as a microcosm of the cultural macrocosm. Based on this assumption Nietzsche appears to claim that decadence in the individual case can illustrate decadence at the cultural level, or *vice versa*.⁴ Decadence in all these realms then results in artificially contrived entities that have an imposed structure or lack one, for the component elements do not constitute an integrated whole, and are deficient in the vitality provided by organic unity.⁵ A failing organism is one of anarchic parts, or paralysed by levelling factors or one led by a tyrannical element. In contrast to this disunity, a successful organism is one that is a cohesive unit because it is led by a dominant element that is 'accepted' by the constituent subordinate parts and together they work in unison.⁶

Before we continue, we should note that for Nietzsche disunity rather than unity is often seen as a fundamental metaphysical attribute of the cosmos and existence in general.⁷ Consequently, there are no pre-given forms and a durable unity is fundamentally a variable and relational multiplicity that is kept together as an organization.⁸ According to Nietzsche, what keeps a unity together is a channelling of a primordial force of energy which results in an expression of power. This process is the basis for his notion of 'will to power',⁹ which he then uses to formulate his conception

³ CW: 7.

⁴ CW: 5 & Epilogue.

⁵ Nietzsche musically compares the decadent Wagner to an unspecified composer: "What Wagner had in common with 'the others' . . . the decline in organizing energy . . . I only know of one musician these days who could create an overture as *a unified whole*: and nobody knows him . . .", CW: 2nd Postscript. He also discusses Wagner's "rhythmical *decadence*", KGB: III:5[(1888)/#1096] = SL, p. 307, and derides his orchestral timbre – the character of its sound – as "brutal, artificial", CW: 1.

⁶ CW: 7.

⁷ BGE: 36, GS: 11, TI: Reason, 2 & Errors, 8, EH: Destiny, 8, KSA: 7:19[236] = WEN, pp. 156-157, 13:11[99] = WLN, pp. 217-219/WP: 12 & 13:14[79] = WLN, pp. 245-247/WP: 635.

⁸ KSA: 12:2[87] = WLN, p. 76/WP: 561.

⁹ KSA: 13:14[121] = WLN, pp. 256-257/WP: 668.

of life.¹⁰ Life is fundamentally about the accumulation of power – this ‘will to power’ – and when it is absent or lacking, decline results.¹¹ Nietzsche’s ideal then is that someone or something is a relevant and integrated whole, and that in order to flourish, it must achieve and maintain a certain kind of unity. However, this unity is a necessary but not a sufficient condition for flourishing. In an earlier text Nietzsche states that even an “inferior and degenerate” culture can have a type of unity.¹² A genuine and flourishing culture and presumably an individual require then other ‘virtues’ – properties – in addition to just unity.¹³ It would appear that of importance are also what elements are being unified, and the underlying quality of those elements. For example, decadence in a cultural entity such as a work of literature manifests itself as a stylistic defect. A novel is made deficient by its author thoughtlessly interspersing it with strikingly refined sentences at the expense of characterisation and plot, which undermines its overall unity and coherence.

Evidently style matters greatly to Nietzsche. The quality of the component parts of an entity is important for achieving a unity of great style. His model of style is drawn from a classical aesthetic perspective. He often talks of ‘great style’ that characterizes the finest Greek and Roman cultural products, one that was “no longer just as art”, but exhibits a propensity to confront “reality, truth, *life*”, by virtue of the embracement of scientific methods.¹⁴ This model is also applied to individuals, where the classical ideal is associated with a stronger, well-formed and rounded ‘higher’ type, who is compared to the flawed specimens of modernity.¹⁵ Nietzsche claims that the unconscious and underlying drives and instincts,¹⁶ such as the drive for food or sex that direct behaviour, are reflected

¹⁰ KSA: 12:2[190] = WP: 254.

¹¹ A: 6.

¹² DS: 2.

¹³ See Huddleston (2019), pp. 90-92.

¹⁴ A: 59.

¹⁵ KSA: 13:11[31] = WLN, pp. 207-208/WP: 868.

¹⁶ Stern (2015), p. 124, states that: “Despite the differences in their use in ordinary language, these terms may be treated as equivalent . . . In the human case, drive or instinct may therefore be taken to be a nonconscious urge or guiding power that makes a person act in a way that *seems* rational and purposive but that is not in fact (consciously) rational and purposive.” For Katsafanas (2016), p. 10, “Nietzsche’s most important psychological concept, [is] the drive (*Trieb* or *Instinkt*). . . Drives are non-conscious dispositions that generate affective orientations.”

in our conscious thoughts and actions.¹⁷ Drives are desires or needs (*Bedürfnisse*) such as the drive to seek sustenance – that seek to dominate, and orientate a person. As Nietzsche puts it in a late note, “[e]very drive is a kind of lust for domination (*Herrschaft*); each has its perspective, which it would like to impose as a norm on all the other drives.”¹⁸ With the presence of a deep-seated organizing ‘idea’, the optimal configuration of these drives is achieved.¹⁹ The end product is an ideal ‘higher’ type of well-constituted individual, who because of their resolute capacity to accept reality for what it is and faces life head on in a rational manner, exhibits the highest, grandest style – which is the gratifying expression of their robust will to power.²⁰ For Nietzsche then, style can be said to be an emergent property that gives us insight into the inner workings of the body, and so he defines style as the ability to communicate²¹ a state of mind.²² For example, in an early text, he describes the writing style of two of his favourite philosophers – Schopenhauer and Montaigne – as projecting one of honesty and cheerfulness.²³ However, there is no one law of style. There are different states and ways of life, and the individual can learn from culture. Unity of style is the sign of a model writer²⁴ and also of an authentic culture.²⁵ When one has achieved a unity akin to that of culture, one will have a unity of style – namely “great style”.²⁶

Nietzsche’s conception of decadence as disunity then works at a number of levels. Most obviously there appears to be a lack of unity of component parts within the individual or cultural

¹⁷ Conway (1997), pp. 30-32, claims that due to his theory of decadence, from 1888 Nietzsche makes a subtle distinction between drive or impulse (*Trieb*), and instinct (*Instinkt*), and that prior to this date, he had always used the terms interchangeably. Conway’s distinction has generally been rejected: “According to Conway . . . *Instinkt* refers to a *Trieb* that has been “organized” or “trained to discharge” in a specific way . . . I find Conway’s textual evidence for this alleged distinction unpersuasive”, Katsafanas (2013), p. 727. In a similar vein – and in my view with more success – Huddleston (2019), p. 85, argues that when discussing decadence in *TI*: Socrates, 11: “Nietzsche in this passage uses ‘instinct’ [*Instinkt*] in both its singular and its plural form, two times each. He is not always consistent with his terminology, and in this context, ‘instinct’ (singular) and ‘instincts’ (plural) make most sense when seen as referring to different things: ‘Instincts’ are animalistic drives (though shaped somewhat as well by one’s social context). ‘Instinct’ (as it is used in the singular here) is being able to act in a way that comes as second nature. Acting with instinct (in this sense) is not a matter of just letting impulses (instincts in the former sense) take their course; it is an ability one develops or achieves through painstaking work (Cf., BGE, 188).”

¹⁸ KSA: 12:7[60] = *WLN*, p.139/*WP*: 481.

¹⁹ *EH*: *Clever*, 9.

²⁰ KSA: 13:11[138] = *WLN*, pp. 226-227/*WP*: 341.

²¹ *EH*: *Books*, 4.

²² *WS*: 88.

²³ *SE*: 2.

²⁴ *DS*: 11.

²⁵ *DS*: 1.

²⁶ *A*: Preface & 59, *EH*: *Books*, 4 & *TI*: *Skirmishes*, 11.

entity. However, due to the inextricable relationship that exists between the individual as a social animal, and that of the society that the individual has little choice but to dwell in, I will show that Nietzsche's conception of decadence should also be construed as a disunity that develops between individuals and society. I will examine this possibility after looking first at what for Nietzsche constitutes decadence in the individual.

1.3 Decadence and the Individual: Nietzsche's Three Formulae, Two Recipes and One Analogy for Decadence

In this section I will analyse Nietzsche's conception of decadence in the individual which he portrays as a form of disunity and fundamentally a physiological disorder.²⁷ Decadents are the "ill-constituted" (*Mißbrathenen*),²⁸ the embodiment of physiological weakness,²⁹ and according to Nietzsche it is this physiological type that comprises the vast majority of individuals.³⁰ Their weakness reveals itself in symptoms that are visible only to a suitably cognisant interpreter of modernity:

Today we no longer know how to separate moral and physiological degeneration: the former is merely a symptom-complex of the latter; one is necessarily bad, just as one is necessarily ill.³¹

Manifestations of these symptoms are to be found in the moral beliefs, values and behaviour of individuals. In another notebook entry we find a wide-ranging list of what he regards as expressions of decadence:

Consequences of decadence: vice—the addiction to vice; sickness—sickliness; crime—criminality; celibacy—sterility; hystericism—weakness of the will; alcoholism; pessimism; anarchism; libertinism (also of the spirit). The slanderers, underminers, doubters, destroyers.³²

²⁷ A: 17, KSA: 13:15[10] = WP: 851 & 13:17[6] = WP: 44.

²⁸ KSA: 13:23[1] = WP: 734. Cf., KSA: 13:11[371] = WP: 153.

²⁹ KSA: 13:15[120] = WP: 857.

³⁰ *TJ*: Skirmishes, 33.

³¹ KSA: 13:14[113] = WP: 334.

Nietzsche makes no systematic attempt to explain the condition, but in his published works of 1888 he makes three references to a ‘formula for decadence’, and another two references to a ‘recipe for decadence’, together with an analogy of decadence to alcohol that also appears in his notebooks. I will argue that these are in fact three different *kinds* of illustration of the phenomenon. When combined they provide a succinct initial summary of what Nietzsche means by decadence, where the formulae provide *descriptions*, the recipes give *examples* and the analogy a *comparison* to convey a similarity in functioning of the stupefying effect of a narcotic. I believe that in the context of decadence, none of the secondary literature on Nietzsche mentions the two recipes at all, nor the analogy he draws, and there are only a few examples of a cursory discussion of the three formulae. This includes Alexander Nehamas’ general and highly influential study on Nietzsche,³³ but also a small number of commentaries that specifically examine the nature of decadence. Of the latter, Andrew Huddleston’s book length exposition mentions one,³⁴ as does an article by Bruce Ellis Benson.³⁵ Daniel Ahern³⁶ only briefly focuses on one formula and quotes another, but it is a misquote referring again to the first, and Daniel Conway only fleetingly considers two and thereby suggests he offers only two, and only later quotes the third.³⁷ I will next provide an analysis of these formulae, recipes and analogy in order to provide an introductory exposition of decadence that I will expand upon in later chapters.

I will start with the three formulae for decadence and the significant interpretive challenges they pose. Nietzsche states in a notebook entry written two years prior to his published works of 1888 that he does not comprehend a formula as just a rule for subsequent application, or as that which functions as a model for imitation. Rather, he states one constructs a formula and uses it to simplify or condense the description of entire phenomena for the purpose of facilitating possible

³² KSA: 13:14[73] = WP: 42.

³³ Nehamas (1985), p. 124.

³⁴ Huddleston (2019), p. 84.

³⁵ Benson (2007), p. 29.

³⁶ Ahern (1995), p. 22 & p. 90.

³⁷ Conway (1997), p. 23 & p. 191.

knowledge.³⁸ By so doing he is not constructing or affirming a 'law', but is instead broaching the question, 'how is it that there is a regular occurrence of a certain phenomenon?' To give another example of this kind of usage of 'formula' with regard to another elusive concept, Nietzsche also speaks of a formula for greatness, which as we have seen is linked to his conception of style.³⁹ In the following discussion in the remainder of this chapter, I will take these three formulas for decadence as indicators to interpret Nietzsche's conception of decadence as firstly, a kind of illness; secondly as offering a diagnosis of it as one of suffering due to weakness as a cause; thirdly with a subsequent effect of revulsion and rejection of reality.⁴⁰

1.3.1 The First Formula: Anti-Instincts

The first formula for decadence is taken from *Twilight of the Idols* and Nietzsche's discussion of the problem of Socrates, where he seeks to establish that the value of life cannot be estimated and any judgment concerning it only reveals the person's life-denying or life-affirming tendencies. The formula highlights the underlying problem as a form of physiological degeneration:

To *have* to fight the instincts – that is the formula for decadence: as long as life is *ascending*, happiness is equal to instinct.⁴¹

The first formula – I call it the anti-instincts formula – is expressed in the first half of this sentence. It refers to a disorder of the individual's underlying non-rational but regulating and guiding drives and instincts, the most fundamental of which are those for hunger, thirst, sex *etc.* Repressing sexual urges by abstinence is a clear example of regulating instinctive behaviour, but this kind of conflict can also be extended to those drives and instincts it is impossible to ignore. Let's consider an example. The drive to quench my thirst after a stressful day's work would normally be easily satisfied by the ready availability of water, and would probably be considered the most 'natural' and instinctive remedy. However, other possibilities might spring to mind when spurred on by some

³⁸ KSA: 12:7[14] = WP: 629.

³⁹ EH: Clever, 10.

⁴⁰ A: 15.

⁴¹ TI: Socrates, 11.

external stimulus such as passing by an inviting public house. The drive to quench my thirst might now make me think of treating myself by partaking in a refreshing glass of chilled cider, rather than waiting to get to the corner shop and buy a bottle of water. The very consideration to override my natural inclination for water as the means to gratify my thirst by entering a pub to drink cider is a product of my cultural background. However, I might then recall that I need to drive my car later on, so drinking cider might not be a good idea, but the temptation remains and I am left in a quandary. In this example then the drive to quench my thirst has now resulted in some form of inner conflict between differing instinctual responses to a required need; between one that is natural and one that has been culturally acquired. The relevance and importance of this distinction will become clearer as the discussion proceeds.

For Nietzsche, this kind of inner conflict among an individual's drives and instincts and the resultant corrupted bodily configuration leads to a growing disparity between the cognitive and volitional resources that saps an individual's affective energies. It can instil weakness⁴² and result in a general exhaustion⁴³ or weakness of will, an inability to resist stimuli, all of which are as we saw in the quoted notebook entry above, are characteristics of decadence.⁴⁴ For Nietzsche, drives and instincts are fundamental to the makeup of the self, for their configuration determines the nature of that self as being one that is either strong and embraces life, or one that is weak and so is against life. Furthermore, once one despises life, one's own instincts develop into instincts that reject life.⁴⁵ The decadent cannot harness or benefit from his drives and instincts, but only react to them as an independent and exterior force against which he must battle. This has implications for the individual's agency. Individuals so constituted are not free in the sense that they are capable of the self-mastery required for authentic action. No positive, organizing idea of either the conscious or unconscious kind guides the multiplicity of drives and instincts into a coherent whole and hence a

⁴² *TI*: Socrates, 4.

⁴³ *CW*: 5.

⁴⁴ *TI*: Morality, 2.

⁴⁵ *TI*: Socrates, 1.

coherent self.⁴⁶ Decadence then is manifested by a lack of both energy and a central, organizing force to control that energy. However, this should not be misunderstood as Nietzsche advocating any kind of draconian self-control⁴⁷ that values some form of instinctual self-denial or abstinence as advocated by ascetic-based moralities or religions.⁴⁸ For Nietzsche, such behaviour can at best only preserve an organism but it cannot help it grow,⁴⁹ for appropriation and exploitation is the basis of life.⁵⁰ Just as life consists of a multiplicity of forces sustained by nutritional process, so growth involves obtaining resources at the expense or sacrifice of other processes and organisms.⁵¹ We can only be healthy and flourish, Nietzsche thinks, by being ourselves and this entails allowing necessary forms of instinctual expression.⁵²

As quoted above, Nietzsche lists alcoholism as a consequence of decadence. I will use his example in conjunction with my previous example of the natural drive to cure a thirst, to draw an analogy of this internal conflict and the way it affects a person's outlook on life. An individual may turn to alcohol due to an inability to face up to some crisis or misfortune and use it as a means of coping. Such a person's natural physiological and mental makeup has become unbalanced and dis-unified, and declines even more by the prominence of a single overpowering drive, which is to feed his new addiction. The result of this process is that obtaining alcohol becomes a key value for him. His willpower to abstain is easily depleted by the ready supply of it on any high street; his judgement becomes impaired, and all his normal motivations become subordinate to the tyrannical end of obtaining the next drink.

In an analogous manner to the alcoholic servicing his addiction and battling the accompanying bodily cravings, the decadent is constituted by endlessly conflicting, anarchic forces. Like the alcoholic, the decadent's muddled agency is a product of their inner turmoil. It results in his

⁴⁶ *EH*: *Clever*, 9.

⁴⁷ *KSA*: 13:14[164] = *WP*: 248.

⁴⁸ *EH*: *Destiny*, 7.

⁴⁹ *GM*: III, 13.

⁵⁰ *BGE*: 259.

⁵¹ *KSA*: 10:24[14] = *WP*: 641.

⁵² *TI*: *Errors*, 2.

decline as he does not have the strength or ability to organise himself into a disciplined whole capable of the coherent, single-minded actions necessary to deal with life's challenges and create a life worth living. The decadent's decline from a previous state of vitality is analogous to the alcoholic's condition of one of a previous state of well-being, and is actually a symptom of decadence and not synonymous with it. The difference between decline and decadence is made clearer when one understands that Nietzsche views a flourishing life as one with the instinct for growth and the accumulation of power.⁵³ The opposite – a sick and decaying life – is a process of degeneration resulting in decline, with decadence understood as an instinctual disorder as the underlying cause.⁵⁴

I now want to turn to the second corollary of the anti-instincts formula, “as long as life is *ascending*, happiness is equal to instinct”. It offers a contrasting example and describes the consequences of instinctual order. It indicates that for Nietzsche the healthy life is an instinctive life and as such it needs no explaining for it is its own justification. However, when pain and suffering predominate, an ‘explanation’ may be sought, and where one is offered one can infer a state of affairs in which instinctual life is found to be in a state of disarray.⁵⁵ As we shall see, this self-questioning of life often appears as a symptom of decadence. This explains why Nietzsche often regards philosophy as symptomatic of decadence.⁵⁶ Philosophy traditionally offers just such explanations. A prime example for Nietzsche is the philosophical pessimism of Schopenhauer.

1.3.2 The Second Formula: Harmful Instincts

The second formula – which I will call the harmful instincts formula – is also taken from *Twilight of the Idols*, in the long section entitled ‘Skirmishes of an Untimely Man’, where Nietzsche discusses what he considers to be the ills of modernity. This formula is expressed in the first few words, “[t]o choose instinctively what is harmful to *yourself*”. It expands on the first by providing a bridge from

⁵³ A: 6.

⁵⁴ KSA: 13:11[227] = *WLN*, p. 234/*WP*: 39.

⁵⁵ KSA: 13:14[94] = *WP*: 435.

⁵⁵ *TJ*: Skirmishes, 35.

⁵⁶ KSA: 13:11[375] = *WLN*, pp. 237-238/*WP*: 427.

the cause to the end effect, portraying decadence as developing into an unconscious and instinctive process of self-dissolution, where an individual cannot help but act out their constitutive contradictions that are part of the physiological constitution. Their inherent physiological weakness leads the individual's everyday life-governing instincts astray, pointing them in the wrong direction. This causes the individual to waste their ever diminishing remaining power in pursuits of a harmful orientation, for example, driven by selfless motives that devalue the importance of the individual's desires and needs. He opts for what denies life over what promotes life for he erroneously believes that it is life-enhancing:

To choose instinctively what is harmful to *yourself*, to be *tempted* by 'disinterested' motives, this is practically (*gibt beinahe*)⁵⁷ the formula for decadence. 'Not to look for your own advantage' – that is just the moral fig leaf for an entirely different, namely physiological, state of affairs: 'I don't know how to *find* my own advantage any more' . . . Disintegration of the instincts!⁵⁸

To use the analogy of alcohol again, the cultural acceptance of its everyday social use and its ready availability means that an individual may simply believe that indulgence in it is 'normal behaviour'. Their predilection for drinking reflects an inherent but unconscious weakness however, and means they are more likely to slide into dependency. An individual's drinking may get so out of control that despite the fact he is aware that he is drinking himself to death he does nothing to stop it. Those who become decadent, it seems, develop a form of systemic akrasia for they are attracted by what is unhealthy and yet they are unable to resist.⁵⁹ They develop a yearning for the "will to death",⁶⁰ or "the will to nothingness",⁶¹ for decadents have developed an instinctive hatred of life⁶² and the will

⁵⁷ Literally: 'gives almost'.

⁵⁸ *TI*: Skirmishes, 35.

⁵⁹ *CW*: 5.

⁶⁰ This 'death instinct' first appears as "'Will to truth' – that could be a hidden will to death", *GS*: 344, and is later treated as identical to the ascetic ideal, *GM*: III, 24.

⁶¹ *KSA*: 13:14[123] = *WLN*, pp. 258-260/*WP*: 685.

⁶² *KSA*: 13:14[140] = *WP*: 401.

to exit life because they are no longer able to face up to its challenges.⁶³ Ultimately then decadence inclines against life.

1.3.3 The Third Formula: Anti-Reality

The third reference to a formula – which I will call the anti-reality formula – can be found in *The Anti-Christ*. The formula emphasizes “[t]he preponderance of feelings of displeasure over feelings of pleasure”, and expresses the outcome and end product of the previous two:

Who are the only people motivated to *lie their way out of reality*? People who *suffer* from it. But to suffer from reality means that you are a piece of reality that has *gone wrong* . . . The preponderance of feelings of displeasure over feelings of pleasure is the *cause* of that fictitious morality and religion: but preponderance like this provides the *formula* for decadence.⁶⁴

In their physiologically weakened state and their inability to bear or surmount their associated suffering, such individuals look for a means of escape from the painful reality in which they reside. This is similar to the way the unhappy alcoholic finds comfort in and values obtaining the next drink, with the intention of blotting out his problems, yet may actually add to them as his addiction means he loses his job and he shuns activities that do not involve drinking. Analogously, the decadent disregards the needs of their animal self and their bodily limitations in preference to seeking solace from their everyday life. He thereby runs more than likely into the arms of what Nietzsche calls ‘idealism’.⁶⁵

Nietzsche does not use the term ‘idealism’ (*Idealismus*) in either the everyday utopian sense of believing in unrealistic goals or values, nor to refer to any of the loosely related philosophical theories that argue the empirical world is somehow ‘created’ by the mind as expounded in different

⁶³ KSA: 12:5[71] = WLN, pp. 116-121/WP: 55.

⁶⁴ A: 15.

⁶⁵ GM: III, 19 & 26, GS: 372, EH: Clever, 2; Books, 5; BT, 2; HH, 1 & 5; CW, 2, TI: Ancients 2, CW: Epilogue, KSA: 12:7[54] = WLN, pp. 138-139/WP: 617, 12:10[177] = WP: 359, 13:11[122] = WLN, pp. 224-225/WP: 244 & 13:11[124] = WP: 16.

ways by Berkeley, Kant or Hegel. Rather he uses the term 'idealism' to refer to any philosophical, religious or ethical doctrine that denigrates the world we reside in as illusory or inferior in preference to a metaphysical 'true world' (*wahre Welt*), and regards them as 'errors' and as the products of 'cowardice'.⁶⁶ Unhappiness and displeasure develops into an aversion to or rejection of reality and may lead to the construction and contemplation of abstract ideals, such as eternal forms or God, a yearning to reside in this 'true world' where weak individuals can identify their 'true' self with a fictitious notion of an eternal soul.⁶⁷ The preponderance of such idealism functions as an indirect confirmation of the realism Nietzsche wishes to uphold.

Nietzsche interprets beliefs in God, immortality, and free will as metaphysical remedial prescriptions for the weak that underpin the values of morality and religion. In his view dependence on the resultant values prevents one from being, or rather, becoming a genuine self with a will of one's own. Decadents produce a morality of selflessness as adherents cannot be said to have individual wills. This is because they prefer to make judgements as a group or 'herd' of which they are part, based on the prescriptions of moral authorities such as the priest.⁶⁸ This is what the later Nietzsche calls an 'unselfing' morality.⁶⁹ Morality's central values of asceticism and pity make weakness a virtue. Nietzsche claims asceticism demands resistance to one's own instincts and to defy those instincts that inflict suffering on oneself, that one instead awaits revenge in the 'true world'. Regular practice of pity leads to increased susceptibility to react to the suffering of another, and, at its extreme, to become unable to be indifferent to another. They combine to make a virtue out of the incapacity to resist reacting to suffering when suffering should be viewed as a necessary feature of reality. Such lack of resistance, as we shall see, is a chief characteristic of decadence. Nietzsche believes that by exposing that metaphysics is born out of such weakness casts doubt on its truth and universality. This is one of his strategies to show that the values and practices of the

⁶⁶ *EH*: Preface, 3.

⁶⁷ *EH*: D, 2 & Destiny, 8.

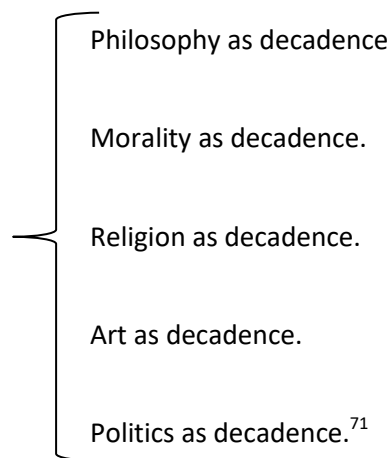
⁶⁸ *KSA*: 13:23[4] = *WP*: 282.

⁶⁹ *EH*: Destiny, 7.

morality of selflessness undermines flourishing and supports certain types.⁷⁰ However, in what is a self-perpetuating circle – and this brings us back to the anti-reality formula – these decadent individuals enact accepted value judgements, and continue to produce cultural entities that are symptomatic manifestations of their decadence:

Image of decadence: Its Symptoms.

Overgrowth of higher values with these symptoms.



It is these cultural manifestations of decadence that in turn prove irresistibly appealing to other decadents, and thus perpetuate the degeneration of mankind's underlying instincts by the acceptance of decadent values.⁷² For example, one should not see the religious person as decadent because of his religiosity but see the religiosity as a symptom of decadence understood as a psycho-physiological condition.

To summarise then, a careful first interpretation of the three formulae provides us an initial understanding and general description of decadence. They show that for Nietzsche, decadence in the individual denotes firstly, disorderly instincts, that secondly, harmfully orient the self, and thirdly,

⁷⁰ Nietzsche is undoubtedly aware of what constitutes a genetic fallacy, and that the origin of a value does not really tell us anything about the value today. Yet Finken (2012), argues that in two minor instances Nietzsche seems to embrace this kind of mistake, but his entire approach does not fall foul of the problem as Jacob Golomb or Robert C. Solomon have proposed.

⁷¹ Bild der *décadence*: ihre Symptome. Überwachung der höheren Werthe mit diesen Symptomen. { Philosophie als *décadence* Moral als *décadence*. Religion als *décadence*. Kunst als *décadence*. Politik als *décadence*. KSA: 13:15[101] = MT.

⁷² KSA: 13:11[227] = WLN, p. 234/WP: 39.

often correlates with embracing cultural artefacts such as metaphysical, religious or political beliefs that reject reality. In one passage Nietzsche offers a contrasting pair of exemplars: he distinguishes the decadent Plato with his moralism and flight into idealism, from the non-decadent Thucydides and Sophists who are commended by Nietzsche for their realism, their non-moralism, and their acceptance of the world.⁷³

In addition to these three formulae however, Nietzsche also twice mentions ‘a recipe for decadence’. Both recipes exhibit the three salient points from each of the three formulae cited above. He also refers to recipes for decline,⁷⁴ physiological degeneration,⁷⁵ domestication as civilization,⁷⁶ as well as on how to be a good novelist⁷⁷ and a great man.⁷⁸ However, he makes no comment anywhere in his writings on what exactly he means by a recipe, or the difference between one and a formula. As indicated above, he views the latter as a common way to condense the description of entire phenomena for the purpose of facilitating possible knowledge. Therefore, arguably, he might mean that we interpret a formula as a more scientific way to describe something when compared with the less exacting notion of a recipe. However, the German meaning of recipe (*Recept/Rezept*) can also be used in a medical context to mean a doctor’s prescription outlining the steps to follow and which medications to take to effect a cure. Indeed, Nietzsche appears to use the term in all these examples to convey this prescriptive sense. So, whereas the three formulae collectively give a *general description* of the phenomenon of decadence, the two recipes offer *examples* of the way Nietzsche perceives decadents also as prescribers. In his view they are instructing others to despise their natural instincts and the animalistic part of humanity, thereby instilling or sustaining a process of decline that will also turn them and future humankind into decadents. Nietzsche cites both recipes then with a negative prescriptive connotation of ‘if you do X as Y says, Z will be the unfortunate outcome’. In particular, both recipes reaffirm the two halves of

⁷³ *TI*: Ancients, 2.

⁷⁴ *EH*: Clever, 9.

⁷⁵ *TI*: Skirmishes, 45.

⁷⁶ *A*: 22.

⁷⁷ *HH*: I, 460.

⁷⁸ *HH*: I, 163.

the first 'anti-instincts' formula for decadence as discussed earlier – to go against your natural instincts on one hand, and everything that feels natural and right on the other – whilst also incorporating the notion of inculcating an instinctually harmful orientation, and the idealism and anti-reality aspects of the second and third formulae respectively.

1.3.4 The First Recipe: The Christian

The first recipe – which I call the Christian recipe – can be found in Nietzsche's autobiography *Ecce Homo* where he reviews his 1881 work *Daybreak*. He has retrospectively come to see the purpose of this book as one of reinterpreting human life without Judeo-Christian values, and so he now perceives it to be the start of his campaign against the pernicious effects of decadence as expressed in a morality of selflessness:

When you divert seriousness from the self-preservation and energy accumulation of the body, which is to say: of life, when you construct an ideal out of anaemia and 'salvation of the soul', out of contempt for the body, what is that if not a *recipe* for decadence? – The loss of a centre of gravity, resistance to natural instincts, in a word 'selflessness' – this is what has been called 'morality' so far . . . In *Daybreak* I first took up the fight against the morality of 'unselfing'. –⁷⁹

For Nietzsche, selflessness is the principle⁸⁰ of and a true sign of decadence.⁸¹ It is the opposite of self-seeking, an assault on life's fundamental instincts that leads to a form of 'depersonalization' brought about by being taught decadent values.⁸² Christianity, he argues, is guilty of encouraging a general disdain for our body. It teaches to defy our natural instincts, whilst redirecting the correct focus of caring for our earthly well-being into a spurious and harmful practice that instead concentrates on redemption of a fictitious eternal soul. Such an ideal moreover instils a condition of 'anaemia' or feebleness that dilutes any natural instinctual expression. This undermines a capability for assertive self-expression of this life in favour of serving another, removed from reality. The

⁷⁹ EH: D, 2.

⁸⁰ NCW: Antipodes.

⁸¹ EH: Destiny, 8.

⁸² EH: Destiny, 7.

implication then is that by prescribing a specific way of life, Christianity is actually inducing an illness for which it purports to be the cure. This is effectively confusion between that of cause and effect brought about by a defamation of the body. One where religious authorities provide an erroneous, supernatural explanation – such as God’s punishment – for unpleasant feelings or medical conditions, including even those induced by following the religion’s creed. As we shall see in a following chapter, for Nietzsche this kind of mistaken projection inverting cause and effect is an important characteristic of the consequences of decadence.

1.3.5 The Second Recipe: The Kantian

The second one – which I call the Kantian recipe – can be found in *The Anti-Christ*. Here Nietzsche makes the point that people should do what is required for them to thrive rather than follow general rules that do not fit their natures. Hence, in Nietzsche’s hyperbolic assessment, Kant’s categorical imperative – to act according to the maxim that one would wish all other rational people to follow, as if it were a universal law – is so unnatural and harmful that it endangers humankind itself.

Nietzsche further rejects Kant’s ideal on the grounds that it is a detrimental prescription that turns people into an automaton, in defiance of their natural instincts. So as to avoid any unnatural compulsion, ideally a virtue for Nietzsche must be of the individual’s creation rather than an abstract duty that must be followed universally for its own sake. More specifically, he accuses Kant of merely replacing God’s dictate of ‘Thou shalt’ by another universal maxim that shows all the signs of being borne of the theologian’s instinct. His categorical Imperative is merely another means of maintaining a secular *a priori* justification for Christian morality whilst he furtively erases God from the picture:

A virtue needs to be our *own* invention, our *own* most personal need and self-defence: in any other sense, a virtue is just dangerous. Whatever is not a condition for life *harms* it: a virtue that comes exclusively from a feeling of respect for the concept of ‘virtue’, as Kant would have it, is harmful. ‘Virtue’, ‘duty’, ‘goodness in itself’, goodness that has been stamped with the character of the impersonal and universally valid – these are fantasies and manifestations of

decline, of the final exhaustion of life . . . The most basic laws of preservation and growth require the opposite: that everyone should invent his *own* virtues, his *own* categorical imperatives. A people is destroyed when it confuses its *own* duty with the concept of duty in general . . . To think that people did not sense the *mortal danger* posed by Kant's categorical imperative! . . . The theologian instinct was the only thing that came to its defence! – When the instinct of life compels us to act, pleasure proves that the act is *right*: and this nihilist with the intestines of a Christian dogmatist saw pleasure as an *objection* . . . What could be more destructive than working, thinking, feeling, without any inner need, any deeply personal choice, any *pleasure*? as an automaton of 'duty'? It is almost the *recipe* for decadence, even for idiocy . . . Kant became an idiot . . . The instinct that is wrong about everything, anti-nature as instinct, German decadence as philosophy – *this is Kant!* –⁸³

Nietzsche then connects the general negative valuation of our body and natural instincts that is conveyed in the Christian recipe, to a specific instance of an anti-instinctual, anti-natural prescription made by the Kantian recipe. In both recipes, the vilification of the instincts is meant to be a means for making human beings 'better' or 'good', whereas for Nietzsche they are really a way of prescribing decadence because of the physiological effects they have on our natural instincts. They are merely symptomatic of the underlying decadence of Christianity in general and Kant in particular. In the next section I will return to the alcohol analogy and show in which sense Nietzsche sees Christianity as furthering or prescribing decadence.

1.3.6 An Analogy for Decadence: Christianity and Alcohol

In fact Nietzsche uses the predominant recipe for decadence – that of Christianity – in order to draw an analogy with alcohol as I have done, but in a more precise way as I will shortly elucidate. The origins of this *comparison* and the similarity in the way he perceives the two to function can be traced to a passage in *Human, All too Human* – a book that ostensibly pre-dates his interest in

⁸³ A: 11.

decadence – where Nietzsche contrasts two opposing types of individual. On the one hand there is Nietzsche’s ideal, the exception of the ‘free spirit’. This is someone who thinks and acts differently from what the dominant views of the age would expect of him, for he has “liberated himself from tradition . . . he demands reasons”.⁸⁴ On the other hand there is the conventional norm of a ‘fettered spirit’ – or what is later referred to as the decadent ‘herd-type’ – someone whose thoughts and actions are constrained by his ready acceptance of the prevailing values and “takes up his position, not for reasons, but out of habit”.⁸⁵ A prime example of the latter type for Nietzsche is the Christian, who does not become one as the result of a reflective choice after pursuing a course in comparative religion, but rather in the way “as a man born in wine-producing country becomes a winedrinker”.⁸⁶

What Nietzsche means by this is that practising Christianity – like drinking wine – has become an integral and valued part of life for the vast majority of Europeans, simply part of the culture they are immersed in from birth, and a social habit passed on to the following generations. Yet he comes to see both as effectively bad habits with detrimental and predictable consequences. Wine or any form of alcohol has the potential to lead the weak-willed astray, for over-indulgence and especially addiction can corrupt their natural drives and instincts, and ultimately lead to the “cowardly or vain assimilation to a dominant regime”.⁸⁷ The later Nietzsche views the values of Christianity as outlined in the recipe above as functioning in the same subjugating manner. Hence he makes the following remark in *The Anti-Christ*: “Christianity, alcohol – the two *great* means of corruption”.⁸⁸

For Nietzsche then, Christianity – like alcohol – can instil or accentuate decadence in an individual with a fragile physiological constitution, thereby forestalling any attempts to create and embrace alternative life-affirming values. A prime example of someone who does just this is his

⁸⁴ HH: I, 225.

⁸⁵ HH: I, 226.

⁸⁶ HH: I, 226.

⁸⁷ KSA: 13:15[80] = WP: 49.

⁸⁸ A: 60.

erstwhile friend Richard Wagner – “The *artist of decadence*”⁸⁹ – in the way he “flatters every aspect of Christianity, every form in which religion expresses decadence”.⁹⁰ According to Nietzsche, Wagner’s opera *Parsifal* in particular advocates redemption in a Christian form by slandering this world and this life in favour of another.⁹¹ His “narcotic art” anaesthetizes feelings⁹² whilst propagating exhaustion in his devotees,⁹³ and so appeals to those searching for a distraction from their own suffering and decay, unaware that the overall effect exacerbates their condition and weakens their ability to resist.⁹⁴ Accordingly, in *The Case of Wagner* Nietzsche claims that “Wagner has the same effect as constant use of alcohol”,⁹⁵ whereas another decadent – Victor Hugo – is depicted in his notebooks as a fellow practitioner of “great charlatanry”⁹⁶ who in a similar way has corrupted the French language:⁹⁷ “His genius acts on the mass in the manner of an alcoholic drink, which at the same time intoxicates and stupefies.”⁹⁸

In *Twilight of the Idols* Nietzsche portrays his fellow Germans as exemplars of a people stupefying themselves by their analogous addictions: “alcohol and Christianity – the two great European narcotics”.⁹⁹ The result is that they are befuddled and unable to think and act for themselves, evaluate coherently, standing as first-rate representatives of a contaminated and ailing culture. Indeed, Nietzsche makes a fair number of critical remarks about the detrimental effects of alcohol¹⁰⁰ – particularly (German) beer consumption¹⁰¹ – and its impact on both individuals and cultures throughout all his later writings that coincide with his interest in decadence. In *Ecce Homo*’s retrospective analysis of his own past of “[w]hen I was a decadent”, he alludes to being born into a

⁸⁹ CW: 5.

⁹⁰ CW: Postscript.

⁹¹ NCW: Antipodes.

⁹² CW: 3.

⁹³ CW: 5.

⁹⁴ CW: 8.

⁹⁵ CW: Postscript.

⁹⁶ KSA: 12:9[171] = WP: 825.

⁹⁷ KSA: 13:16[29] = WLN, pp. 274-275/WP: 838. Cf., CW: 11.

⁹⁸ Sein Genie wirkt auf die Masse nach Art eines alkoholischen Getränks, das zugleich berauscht und dumm macht. KSA: 11:38[6] = MT. Cf., KSA: 11:26[454].

⁹⁹ TI: Germans, 2.

¹⁰⁰ BGE: 252, GM: III, 21 & 26, GS: 42 & 134, TI: Germans, 2, EH: Clever, 1, A: 60, CW: Postscript, KSA: 11:34[83], 11:38[6], 13:14[73] = WP: 42, 13:15[32], & 13:15[80] = WP: 49.

¹⁰¹ BGE: 244, GM: III, 26, TI: Germans, 2, EH: UM, 2 & HH, 2, & KSA: 13:14[45] = WP: 89.

drinking culture that unsurprisingly resulted in over-indulgence in his later youth, and how even in his later years imbibing the smallest amounts of alcohol disagrees with him.¹⁰² A possible sub-text for these admissions is that in claiming to have successfully resisted decadence himself by his use of the past tense, he sees abstinence as one obvious way to assist any nascent free-spirit in accomplishing the same feat: “I cannot recommend seriously enough that all spiritual natures give up alcohol entirely. *Water* is enough”.¹⁰³

Having provided an introductory and general description of decadence via the three formulae, including an interpretation of his two example prescriptions for it, and the way he portrays the workings of the predominant one via an analogy, I will now briefly expand upon these discussions and examine why Nietzsche believes we need and accept such cultural prescriptive measures in the first place.

1.4 Decadence and Culture and Their Relationship to the Individual

As we shall see in more detail when we examine the method Nietzsche uses to unmask decadence in the following chapter, for him the question arises – as mentioned in the anti-reality formula for decadence above – just why we seek explanations for existence and have such prescriptive examples for living like the Christian and Kantian recipes at all. Nietzsche’s quest for an answer is stimulated by the belief that our existence is difficult to comprehend given that the world is just so inherently uncertain and unpredictable, with no apparent objective ethical or moral order other than what we try to give it, and with the consequence that people inevitably suffer. This can ultimately lead to a

¹⁰² EH: Wise, 6.

¹⁰³ EH: Clever, 1. Nietzsche was stripped of his status as a school prefect after been found completely drunk by a master at Pforta, and more alcoholic excess was to follow in his days as a member of a university fraternity in Bonn, Young (2010), p. 31 & pp. 53-54.

negative evaluation of existence as exemplified by Schopenhauer's pessimism – life is so blighted by suffering that it is not worth living.¹⁰⁴

Although throughout his career Nietzsche generally subscribes to Schopenhauer's view that life is full of suffering,¹⁰⁵ he soon rejected his erstwhile educator's philosophy as life denying in favour of a life affirming position akin to pre-Socratic philosophers:

The verdict of the philosophers of ancient Greece on the value of existence says so much more than a modern verdict does because they had life itself before and around them in luxuriant perfection and because, unlike us, their minds were not confused by the discord between the desire for freedom, beauty, abundance of life on the one hand and on the other the drive to truth, which asks only: what is existence worth as such?¹⁰⁶

Nietzsche realises that the "modern verdict" can still give rise to a pessimistic belief that repudiates everything in this world if it is judged to be without ultimate value and meaning. This includes humanity itself, which for him is the original sense of the term 'nihilism'.¹⁰⁷ For Nietzsche, there is no inherent meaning to life and the principal reason for human suffering is precisely this meaninglessness. Therefore, there is still a fundamental need for meaning in our lives – to know why we suffer. Moreover, as he articulates this point in *The Genealogy*, the preponderant problem for human beings is the inexplicability of this suffering rather than the actual suffering itself.¹⁰⁸

Nietzsche's notion of decadence emerges from the conceptual coupling of the importance of values and the distorting effects they can have on our culture and individual agency, causing a waning in the life sustaining unity normally contained in and also between the individual and their culture. For him, the practice of creating these explanations – particularly in the form of religious

¹⁰⁴ Schopenhauer (1958), II, XXVIII & XLVI.

¹⁰⁵ See Janaway (2017), who argues that Nietzsche sees suffering as intrinsically valuable, if interpreted and given meaning.

¹⁰⁶ SE: 3.

¹⁰⁷ KSA: 12:2[127] = WLN, pp. 83-84/WP: 1.

¹⁰⁸ GM: III, 14 & 28.

creeds and moral codes – their inbuilt values and the value then placed upon them,¹⁰⁹ results in an existential malaise whose impact is so detrimental that it invariably leads to the decline of the individual and the degeneration of humanity as a whole.¹¹⁰ Nietzsche draws attention to the destructive nature of decadent values in the following way:

What! Is humanity itself decadent? Has it always been? – What is certain is that it has been *taught* decadence values, and *only* decadence values, as the highest values. The morality of un-selfing is the morality of decline *par excellence*, the fact 'I am in decline' translated into the imperative 'thou *shalt* decline' – and *not only* into an imperative! . . . This, the only morality that has been taught so far, the morality of un-selfing, demonstrates a will to the end, it *negates* life at the most basic level.¹¹¹

It seems decadence is *to be against life*, and in particular the rationalising process as exemplified by philosophers, effectuates this decadence by mistakenly placing a value on life. Nietzsche claims “[t]he appearance of the Greek philosophers from Socrates on is a symptom of *décadence*”,¹¹² because for him philosophers have become “*The teachers of the purpose of existence*”, who attempt to give an answer to the question of ‘what is the meaning of life?’, and thereby justify it.¹¹³ Nietzsche’s claim is that humanity’s very nature has been changed by the need for such teachers who provide explanations and a prescriptive purpose for living life, and has instilled in us all a craving to know why we exist that must periodically be satisfied. It has become an acquired drive or need.

However, for Nietzsche our existence is not to be explained by searching for an objective purpose, and aside from the fact that he believes that not such explanation actually exists, any such purpose we do impose on it involves a fracturing of the whole of existence and creates the kind of disunity as outlined above. Nietzsche believes the creation of these explanations and prescriptions is

¹⁰⁹ Scott (1988) discusses the useful concept of ‘rationales for existence’ – but without defining the term – which I take to mean subscribing to a religion or a moral system, or the upholding of specific individual values.

¹¹⁰ *GM*: Preface, 6.

¹¹¹ *EH*: Destiny, 7.

¹¹² *KSA*: 13:11[375] = *WLN*, pp. 237-238/*WP*: 427.

¹¹³ *GS*: 1.

premised on lack of appreciation for the holistic nature of existence that results in an inability to affirm the totality of life. In his view we cannot simply detach ourselves from our existence and then foist a purpose from an external perspective on to it.¹¹⁴ We are a concerned party, in and hence part of the whole and nothing exists apart from this whole:

The fatality of human existence cannot be extricated from the fatality of everything that was and will be. People are *not* the products of some special design, will, or purpose, they do *not* represent an attempt to achieve an 'ideal of humanity', 'ideal of happiness', or 'ideal of morality', – it is absurd to want to *devolve* human existence onto some purpose or another. We have invented the concept of 'purpose': there *are* no purposes in reality . . . A person is necessary, a person is a piece of fate, a person belongs to the whole, a person only *is* in the context of the whole, – there is nothing that can judge, measure, compare, or condemn our being, because that would mean judging, measuring, comparing, and condemning the whole . . . *But there is nothing outside the whole!*¹¹⁵

A decadent for Nietzsche is someone who attempts to fracture the whole, and make a piece of it more significant than the whole. This is what one does when one places a specific value on life which is for Nietzsche an act of decadence.

Humanity then has unintentionally come to embrace a paradoxical situation. Whilst the adoption of these explanations and prescriptions may have become necessary for the survival and flourishing as a species, the resultant effect has been to usher in its degeneration. Let's look in more detail at the example of Socrates.

1.4.1 The Individual-Cultural Dynamic: The Example of Socrates

Nietzsche uses the case of Socrates to illustrate how this individual-cultural dynamic unravels to produce a failure of cohesive unity within the self. Socrates is aware of the cultural degeneration of Athens. The previously healthy culture that strove for and valued the enhancement of power, where

¹¹⁴ *TJ*: Morality, 5.

¹¹⁵ *TJ*: Errors, 8.

conquest was a mark of nobility and was embodied in the strength and vitality of the instincts of the noble elite, is now in chaos. Just as the first formula for decadence stipulates, the instincts of everyone – including Socrates' own – are now in anarchy as they are no longer guided by an *ascendant* organising instinct and hence are not unified,¹¹⁶ which is indicative of the onset of decadence.¹¹⁷ Rather than marshalling his recalcitrant instincts by integrating them into a cohesive unity, Socrates response is to attribute this chaos to ignorance and advocate to his fellow Athenians that rationality will be their saviour, such that the latter can be construed as pertaining to the second formula by being the first step towards inaugurating an instinctive harmful choice.¹¹⁸ He uses dialectics to justify what he believes in and cherishes – such as figuring out the essence of piety or justice – and that this activity is eminently more important than any other and indeed is the only route to the good life. He follows the third formula for decadence by becoming absurdly rational and takes reason to be an ideal above all reality, a kind of panacea, the route by way of knowledge and virtue, to happiness.¹¹⁹ However, in combatting decadence in this way, he is allowing just that part of him – his rational part – to *tyrannize* the rest of him, and it does not extract him from the problem. Rather, at best Socrates can hope to change the expression of decadence but cannot get rid of it, and in fact he ends up propelling himself further into decadence.¹²⁰

The degree of cultural degeneration between that of Socratic ancient Greece and modernity is reflected with the status of the instinctual disarray contained in the first two formulae for decadence of fighting the instincts and making harmful instinctual choices. The first formula is taken from the context of Socrates who is battling with his instincts, which suggests the onset of decadence. He is looking for a 'cure' for his own and the prevailing instinctual anarchy around him, that results in his developing of rationality. The second formula is taken from a passage that is entitled 'Criticism of the morality of decadence', where the battle of the instincts is already lost for

¹¹⁶ *Ti*: Socrates, 9.

¹¹⁷ *Ti*: Socrates, 4.

¹¹⁸ *Ti*: Socrates, 10.

¹¹⁹ *Ti*: Socrates, 4.

¹²⁰ *Ti*: Socrates, 11.

they have disintegrated, for one is instinctively choosing a harmful orientation; one is already enveloped in a decadent culture and is conducting one's life with the perceived value of an altruistic morality.¹²¹ The first formula reveals that the prevailing ancient Greek culture is turning decadent, and in the second that culture has already succumbed to its effects.

For Nietzsche, the decline of the culture of a given society can be traced to the inevitable deterioration of the traditions, conventions, customs and institutions that jointly function to shape it and that instil into its members the norms and expectations of the culture in question. In assessing the degree of health of a society, Nietzsche examines the structural integrity of its component cultural institutions that represent matters of education, law, morality, religion and social customs. In his view, when the order inherent in these institutions starts to break down so begins an estrangement between the guiding culture and the acculturated individual. This estrangement manifests itself in the individual as a sort of over-civilization in which the underlying drives and instincts are civilized away, producing a lack of energy in conjunction with a lack of a dominant, organising drive to control that energy so that one functions as a coherent whole. Lacking energy to organise their instincts to provide orientation for a future, the individual is now helpless and unable to oppose the decadence that has enveloped them.¹²² All postulated rejoinders are merely alternative manifestations of the decadence they are supposed to tackle.¹²³ Gripped by the decadence means that the individual can at best only inhibit the inevitable, the decadence of the culture must be left to run its course.¹²⁴

¹²¹ *TJ*: Skirmishes, 35.

¹²² *TJ*: Skirmishes, 39.

¹²³ *TJ*: Skirmishes, 37.

¹²⁴ *TJ*: Skirmishes, 43.

1.4.2 The Individual-Cultural Dynamic: Examples from the Secondary Literature

What the example of Socrates – whom Nietzsche brands “a typical decadent”¹²⁵ – and his inherent instinctual disarray strongly suggests, is that the term ‘decadence’ *per se* does not solely refer to the life denying attitude, ideals or values one adopts, or a culture that is based upon them. Rather the term also refers – perhaps less obviously, although I will argue more importantly – to an underlying, life-inhibiting condition of disunity and disorder that has a physiological basis. This physiological weakness induces – as we shall see as the overall discussion proceeds – corresponding psychological defects that impels an individual to create or adopt certain values that are detrimental to their flourishing. Consequently, Nietzsche claims that Socrates is just like Plato and other so-called ‘wise’ men because they all have something in common: a physiology that drives them to take a negative approach to life.¹²⁶ Some commentators regard this physiological aspect as less important, and instead focus on the aspect of values and their cultural connotations for their understanding of decadence. For example, in David Weir’s recent introductory book on the subject, although he discusses Nietzsche, decadence is exclusively portrayed as a socio-cultural phenomenon.¹²⁷ Douglas Burnham’s *Nietzsche Dictionary* contains an entry for ‘decadence’ that summaries the conception in the following way:

[B]y ‘decadence’ N[ietzsche] means any period of cultural history – or any state of the human organism – which has lost its good taste and value judgement . . . It is to be associated either with the decline of old cultures, or with moral revolutions . . . Decadent cultures are exhausted cultures, such cultures often exhibit a pathological over-sensitivity; indeed, often an inability not to respond, lacking the strength simply to inhibit one’s passions . . . Most of

¹²⁵ *EH*: BT, 1.

¹²⁶ *TI*: Socrates, 2.

¹²⁷ Weir (2018), p. 24 & pp. 46-47. Benson (2008) does not mention physiology at all, other than in an indirect way when he briefly discusses the role of drives and instincts, and also the body p. 59 & pp. 177-178, respectively. Scott (1998), Gogroff-Voorhees (1999), Dudley (2002), Silk (2004) and Acharya (2014) are similar in this respect, whereas Ahern (1995), Conway (1997), Moore (2002a), Evans (2010) and Huddleston (2019), do draw attention to the physiological aspect of decadence, although to differing degrees.

the above could serve as an account of the notion of degeneration or corruption . . . If there is a distinction to be drawn from decadence, degeneration tends to have a stronger physiological emphasis . . .¹²⁸

Burnham does not acknowledge the physiological basis of decadence and associates physiology with degeneration. Unlike Burnham, Brian Leiter gestures towards, but does not fully develop the centrality of the physiological basis and subsequent psychological process when elucidating how people adopt certain harmful values using his conception of type-facts.¹²⁹

[E]ach of us has an essential psycho-physical constitution – a set of type-facts that make us what we are – and our actions, and even our conscious life, are all causally determined by these natural facts about us . . . just as natural facts – type-facts – about a tree determine the fruit that tree necessarily bears, so too natural type-facts about a person determine the “fruit” that person necessarily bears – that is, the ideas and values he comes to embrace.¹³⁰

The type-facts of an individual’s ‘psycho-physical constitution’ “defines him as a particular *type* of person”, by which I take Leiter to mean his constitution arises from their specific configuration of drives and instincts.¹³¹ For Leiter, one ‘type-fact’ – that of ‘will to power’ – “is of central importance for Nietzsche”,¹³² because we all try to maximize our strength or power. Leiter acknowledges that these type-facts may be necessary, but not sufficient.¹³³ For what happens to the course of a person’s life – their “life trajectory” – also depends on those factors that constitute their environment and other circumstances, which themselves are not causally determined by these type-facts.¹³⁴ The combination of type-facts and circumstances “must figure in any explanation of what we do and believe”, and in particular, values can exert a causal influence on a person’s ‘life

¹²⁸ Burnham (2015), pp. 93-95.

¹²⁹ Leiter (2015), pp. 232-263 provides a survey of opposing views, including those of Janaway and Gemes.

¹³⁰ Leiter (2015), p. 76.

¹³¹ Leiter (2015), p. 6 & p. 252.

¹³² Leiter (2015), p. 253.

¹³³ Leiter (2015), p. 257.

¹³⁴ Leiter (2015), p. 65, p. 72 & p. 78.

trajectory', and allow or inhibit that person's ability to fashion his own life. He then links this directly to decadence:¹³⁵

[T]he values an agent is exposed to can affect the agent – but only in virtue of type-facts about that agent . . . agents can come to accept values that are, overall, harmful to that type of agent only in virtue of type facts about agents that would lead them to do so – this, in fact, is the very essence of “decadence” for Nietzsche.¹³⁶

Noting that in *The Anti-Christ*, Nietzsche equates corruption and decadence,¹³⁷ Leiter continues:

Thus, when higher men come to believe in MPS [Morality in the Pejorative Sense] this is simply a case of decadent type-facts about agents doing the work of belief-fixation: an agent with corrupt instincts – a type-fact about that agent – will embrace “disadvantageous” values *because of this type-fact*.¹³⁸

A person's ‘type-facts’ then – their psycho-physical constitution – causes an individual to create ‘disadvantageous’ or harmful values, or to be susceptible to their influence.¹³⁹

Leiter's account implies that an analysis of Nietzsche's conception of decadence needs to be founded upon a basis of physiological disorder, and in my opinion, such a condition is what Nietzsche considers to be *the* prime example of an internal structural disunity that he more generally equates with term ‘decadence’. Indeed, Nietzsche unambiguously makes this point in a notebook entry when he states that a misunderstanding of the true nature of the phenomenon of decadence will arise if “one fails to understand decadence as a physiological condition (*nicht als*

¹³⁵ Leiter (2015), p. 253.

¹³⁶ Leiter (2015), p. 128.

¹³⁷ A: 6.

¹³⁸ Leiter (2015), p. 128.

¹³⁹ Richard Schacht presents a similar interpretation in his discussion of Nietzsche's portrayal of a predilection by some philosophers: “[T]o develop various metaphysical schemes involving a distinction between ‘this world,’ construed as a merely ‘apparent world,’ and another realm to which all honors are accorded. ‘The latter has hitherto been called the “real world,” “truth,” “God.”’ For Nietzsche, however, it is a ‘world invented by a lie,’ which ‘we have to abolish’ – a ‘lie’ born of a lamentable disposition he seeks to diagnose . . . He often links the prevalence of this disposition to the general condition he calls ‘decadence’; and he diagnoses the phenomenon of ‘decadence’ ultimately as a consequence of certain physiological deficiencies and psychological defects.”, Schacht (1983), p. 27.

physiologisch)”.¹⁴⁰ Nietzsche further illustrates the importance of this condition when he claims that the only interesting thing about another “typical decadent” – Wagner, who is discussed in Chapter 5.2 – is “the logic with which a horrible physiological condition (*ein physiologischer Missstand*) is advanced step by step, argument by argument, as a practice and procedure, as an innovation in principles, as a crisis in taste.”¹⁴¹

1.5 Conclusion

In this chapter I presented an outline of Nietzsche’s theory of decadence by way of his formulae, recipes and an analogy, arguing that for him, decadence is a form of disorder. In particular, decadence is a kind of formal or structural failing – a disunity and disorder in individuals and cultures and also between them – which prevents them from flourishing.¹⁴² Decadence represents a lack of holistic integration that can be construed as a kind of organizational failure which Nietzsche associates with declining life.¹⁴³ It manifests itself in an individual as a physiological degeneration, in response to the demands made on the self in the name of an improved humanity and the prescriptions for life imposed by civil society. This instils an inherent weakness within an individual, an inability to fully embrace life and act as a coherent self that is a consequence of – and also reflected in – most of the values that a decadent produces and cherishes. Decadence for the individual is a form of suffering from life, effectively suffering from being oneself such that one ceases to be who one is: one can suffer from being oneself in a number of different ways and to many different effects. Before I elaborate on the contents of this outline by examining the causes and effects of decadence in more detail, I will in the following chapter, turn my attention first to analysing the nature of the overall method and accompanying techniques that Nietzsche uses to unmask and describe the phenomenon of decadence.

¹⁴⁰ KSA: 13:17[6] = WP: 44. Cf., HH: I, 608, A: 17, KSA: 13:14[13], 13:14[222], 13:14[224], 13:15[10] = WP: 851, 13:15[32] & 13:15[34].

¹⁴¹ CW: 7.

¹⁴² Hunt (1991), p. 101 and Huddleston (2019), Chapter 5.

¹⁴³ TI: Skirmishes, 37.

Chapter 2: Nietzsche's Modus Operandi in His Exposition of the Nature of Decadence

2.1 Introduction

The stance that propels Nietzsche's later philosophy in general and his method of enquiry in particular, is portrayed in the secondary literature by Christopher Janaway as follows:

Most commentators on Nietzsche would agree that he is in a broad sense a naturalist in his mature philosophy. He opposes transcendent metaphysics . . . rejects notions of the immaterial soul, the absolutely free controlling will, or the self-transparent pure intellect, instead emphasizing the body, talking of the animal nature of human beings, and attempting to explain numerous phenomena by invoking drives, instincts, and affects which he locates in our physical, bodily existence. Human beings are to be 'translated back into nature', since otherwise we falsify their history, their psychology, and the nature of their values—concerning all of which we must know truths, as a means to the all-important critique and eventual revaluation of values.¹

Methodological naturalism – 'M-Naturalism' – holds the view that a naturalistic philosophy should be continuous with empirical inquiry into the physical sciences, or at least continuous with natural or social science. Brian Leiter makes an additional distinction among M-Naturalists concerning what exactly this notion of continuity with science means. He distinguishes between 'Results Continuity' and 'Methods Continuity'.² The former holds that any philosophical theories concerning morality or knowledge for instance, are to be supported or justified by the results of the sciences if they are to be considered a good theory. 'Methods Continuity' by contrast stresses that successful philosophical theories must merely employ or emulate the experimental methods of inquiry of successful sciences, and also their style of explanation and understanding, which includes the appeal to general causal patterns that explain the phenomena.

¹ Janaway (2007), p. 34.

² Leiter (2015), pp. 2-5.

Leiter believes that “[c]ausation, and causal explanation, is central to Nietzsche’s naturalism”,³ and quotes Nietzsche as saying science consists of “the healthy concepts of cause and effect”⁴ repeatedly.⁵ He argues that Nietzsche’s naturalism is “fundamentally *methodological*”, and emulates the methods of science by trying to construct causal explanations for the moral beliefs and practices of human beings.⁶ Yet it is also “speculative”,⁷ by which he means informed by the prevailing German materialistic science that was grounded in contemporary advances in physiology, and “the idea that observable phenomena have casual determinants”.⁸ Yet Nietzsche does not wait for or rely on the specific results of science before formulating a theory. According to Leiter, what is most important to a Speculative M-Naturalist like Nietzsche is that their theories be informed by the science’s methods (Methods Continuity), and the only kind of ‘Results Continuity’ at work in Nietzsche’s thought is the German Materialists’ advances in physiology.⁹ For Leiter then, Nietzsche employs the *methods* of other successful sciences in order to *speculate* about human nature and psychology.

Janaway disagrees with Leiter to a degree. First, Nietzsche’s notion of will to power – which will be discussed in more detail in the following chapter – makes his adherence to ‘Results Continuity’ to science doubtful. Secondly, Janaway questions the general basis of ‘Methods Continuity’. He argues that emulation of scientific practice can be very loose, for example that unusual belief systems such as Satanism and astrology all attempt to explain various phenomena by locating their causes.¹⁰ Thirdly, Nietzsche’s method is inherently rhetorical and the evidence for a method that is continuous with the scientific is “minimal, amounting to a concern to explain morality in terms of causes”.¹¹ Rather in Janaway’s view:

³ Leiter (2015), p. 255.

⁴ A: 49.

⁵ Leiter (2015), p. 255 & p. 257.

⁶ Leiter (2015), p. 5.

⁷ Leiter (2015), p. 245, p. 247 & p. 261.

⁸ Leiter (2015), p. 245.

⁹ Leiter (2015), p. 6 & p. 246.

¹⁰ Janaway (2007), p. 36.

¹¹ Janaway (2007), p. 52.

Nietzsche is a naturalist to the extent that he is committed to a species of theorizing that explains *X* by locating *Y* and *Z* as its causes, where *Y* and *Z*'s being the causes of *X* is not falsified by our best science.¹²

For Janaway, Nietzsche's stance requires hypotheses that cite causes to explain the change in value distinctions that are not falsified by science. Yet he doubts whether there are actual scientific results supporting Nietzsche's causal explanations. Janaway's emphasis on the 'Results Continuity' of science is interpreted by Leiter as presenting a weaker form of M-Naturalism by overlooking the speculative nature of Nietzsche's naturalism,¹³ whilst accepting that causation is still central to Janaway's account.¹⁴

This debate concerning Nietzsche's naturalism frames the concerns of this chapter. I seek to show that although Nietzsche's theory of decadence is without doubt speculative and informed by the contemporary scientific advances grounded in physiology, the method he employs uses a special type of inference founded upon a specific ordering of cause and effect that is never explicitly discussed by either Leiter or Janaway. I will argue that an understanding of Nietzsche's theory of decadence is far less reliant on speculating about causality in the manner of a 'forward' inference of cause and *then* effect. Rather, what is of importance to his theory is the reverse ordering – observing effects and *then* making inferences to the cause.¹⁵ The process of reasoning from effect to cause is an example of a 'backward inference' – a phrase Nietzsche himself uses – and that is commonly referred to as 'abduction'. In broad terms, abductive reasoning involves taking a given event or a set of facts and extrapolating backwards to infer a hypothesis that serves as a potential explanation for the event or facts. An explanation then is essentially a description about what caused an event to occur, and in general we only accept an abductive explanation if the observed effect can then be inferred from the purported cause.¹⁶

¹² Janaway (2007), p. 38.

¹³ Leiter (2013a), p. 581.

¹⁴ Leiter (2015), p. 254.

¹⁵ This ordering of effect *then* cause is arguably discernible – but not explicit – in Janaway's second quote as cited above.

¹⁶ For example, if I answer a knock on the front door and observe my friend's coat to be wet – the effect – I can claim that it has probably been raining – the cause. This is because I can see that his coat has come into contact with water, and I can

I will begin this chapter with a brief analysis of Nietzsche's distinctive conception of physiology, that is then followed by a discussion of his conception of causality, before moving to examine his 'negative' and 'positive' portrayals of abductive reasoning.

2.2 Nietzsche's Conception of Physiology

Nietzsche regards himself as a "physician of culture", as his aim is to assess and understand the apparent condition of contemporary humanity and its prospect for the future.¹⁷ This quest is undertaken in terms of humanity's interactions with cultural beliefs. The use of such beliefs is in his view, essential to humanity's prospects, but is also driven by the problem that if natural human existence is not worth living, the result is "the great question mark over the value of existence".¹⁸ Nietzsche sets out to assess the apparent utility and meaning of the truths and values of these beliefs and to re-evaluate their worth and validity, only to conclude that they have become debilitated. Such beliefs are currently inhibiting human excellence and cultural flourishing, and are leading to the decline of both. He sees himself as the philosopher-doctor for an ailing Western culture that is 'sick' in comparison to the standard of 'health' set by pre-Socratic ancient Greece. Nietzsche believes that to comprehend truly the nature of this 'illness' requires an uncompromising diagnosis, possibly by physiologists and doctors, as well as philosophers.¹⁹

In his attempt to understand values Nietzsche turns to the body²⁰ and its physiology,²¹ thereby rejecting two long standing philosophical assumptions. First, he denies Descartes' mind-body dualism. This dualism mirrors the Platonic distinction between an imperfect, mortal body and the perfect, immaterial and eternal soul. According to Nietzsche, this dualism was appropriated and

infer that the most likely source of the water is from the sky. However, it is entirely possible that the actual cause of his wet coat is water that came from a hosepipe when cleaning his car. The latter is a less likely explanation, and becomes even more so when I observe that the coat of a passer-by is also wet.

¹⁷ *KSA*: 7:23[15] = *WEN*, p. 167.

¹⁸ *BT*: Self-Criticism, 1.

¹⁹ *GM*: I, 17.

²⁰ *GS*: 2nd Preface, 2, *TI*: Skirmishes, 47, *KSA*: 11:40[15] = *WLN*, p. 43/*WP*: 532.

²¹ *BGE*: 202, *TI*: Skirmishes, 47, *KSA*: 11:40[21] = *WLN*, pp. 43-44/*WP*: 492.

further cultivated by Christianity, turning the body into an object to be reviled.²² Secondly, in his view the supposed unity of the body is really a multiplicity.²³ The body is only seemingly unified such that its needs and goals appear not to be in conflict with each other, which is then sufficient for the identity of the self.²⁴ What ‘I think’ and understand as reality is in fact determined by what he often refers to as ‘the soul’,²⁵ the underlying drives and instincts that form the self. Nietzsche not only denies the identification of the self with self-consciousness. He sees the body and its study – physiology – as essential to his naturalistic project. His attempt “to translate humanity back into nature” is an ascent to nature rather than a return;²⁶ one that would result in exceptional individuals²⁷ who encompass a naturalistic ideal of human flourishing fashioned from an abundance of power.²⁸

Nietzsche uses the term ‘physiology’ in an expansive manner that is different to the modern scientific conception. Physiology for Nietzsche does not just represent the study of the biological basis of life and the functioning of living organisms. For him, physiology also encapsulates the study of nature (*physis*) or matter, by investigating material transformations of assorted unstable forces struggling with each other, and how they become formative of a unitary phenomenon such as a body. Moreover, Nietzsche’s conception of physiology is normally conjoined with a resulting emergent psychology,²⁹ to result in a materialist and anti-dualist discipline that he labels “physio-psychology”.³⁰

Nietzsche believes that our actions can be traced back to evaluations and judgements which are more likely to be adopted than originally our own,³¹ and subsequently ponders over the

²² *TI*: Skirmishes, 47.

²³ *BGE*: 230, *KSA*: 12:2[91] = *WLN*, p. 77/*WP*: 518.

²⁴ *Z*: I, Body.

²⁵ *GS*: 48 & 120, *BGE*: 12, 54 & 268, *GM*: I, 13 & II, 16.

²⁶ *BGE*: 230.

²⁷ *TI*: Skirmishes, 48.

²⁸ *GS*: 301.

²⁹ See Welshon (2014), pp. 41-43.

³⁰ *BGE*: 23. There are very few references to physiology in Nietzsche’s writings before 1880 and the writing of *Daybreak*. From then on a steady use of the term begins, dramatically increasing from 1886 as his interest in decadence develops, reaching a crescendo in both his notebooks and published works of 1888. See Brown (2004), pp. 63-64.

³¹ *D*: 104.

following question: “Could one reduce the value of an action to physiological values: whether it is the expression of a complete or an inhibited life?”³² Values for Nietzsche are not out there, to be discovered, or simply given.³³ Rather they are assigned or created by human beings,³⁴ who experience the world in evaluative terms – from a particular perspective – and values are therefore not objective or universal.³⁵ He concludes that the resulting values are often only involuntary manifestations of more basic, underlying, unconscious physiological forces.³⁶ Thus, the workings and condition of the drives and instincts that comprise the “invisible” inner body – or mortal ‘soul’ – can be known and interpreted via visible signs and symptoms displayed on the surface of the body.³⁷ Nietzsche therefore endows his conception of physiology with a normative role. Physiology is the criterion of value, the primary determining factor of what is good or bad. What is ‘good’ is expressed as a product of strength, health, and ultimately power. What is ‘bad’ is expressive of weakness, sickness, a lack or absence of power.³⁸

Nietzsche employs a technique of what we could call comparative philology in his critique of values in general and morality in particular. He recommends values are analysed and elucidated in physiological terms and then subjected to a medical critique.³⁹ Nietzsche’s use of a physiological criterion can be traced back to his first published book,⁴⁰ which construes aesthetics as applied physiology⁴¹ that will produce a “[p]hysiology of art”.⁴² His later writings then present a number of other examples. These include interpreting moral valuations as manifestations of physiological

³² KSA: 13:14[185] = WP: 291.

³³ The secondary literature contains strongly contrasting views on Nietzsche’s conception of values. For example, Leiter (2015), p. 111, discusses whether Nietzsche should be construed as a realist because there are ‘objective’ facts about value – good, bad, valuable or dis-valuable – that are independent of states of mind, or rather as an anti-realist that denies that there are such ‘objective’ facts about value. Huddleston (2019), Chapter 7, surveys various claims founded upon this distinction, arguing against a strong, Leiter-inspired sceptical reading that for Nietzsche no descriptive values have genuine evaluative standing, in favour of a species of realism about values.

³⁴ GS: 301. Cf., Z: I, Goals.

³⁵ GS: 114.

³⁶ KSA: 13:15[118] = WP: 314. Cf., BGE: 6.

³⁷ D: 119, EH: Clever, 7, NCW: Intermezzo, KSA: 11:40[21] = WLN, pp. 43-44/WP: 492, 13:14[144] & 13:14[145] = WP: 523.

³⁸ A: 57.

³⁹ GM: I, 17.

⁴⁰ BT: Preface, 1.

⁴¹ NCW: Objections.

⁴² CW: 7. Cf., KSA: 12:7[7] = WLN, pp. 132-133.

attainment or breakdown,⁴³ and virtues as merely physiological refinements⁴⁴ that will result in a “physiology of morality”.⁴⁵ Further examples include the doctrine of redemption that is portrayed as a product of “two physiological realities”,⁴⁶ and appreciating philosophical works as really the disguised product of physiological need.⁴⁷ Grammar, too, he claims, can be reduced to physiological and racial conditions,⁴⁸ the rise of the values of mediocrity, such as a herd morality,⁴⁹ and the contemporary indulgence in scepticism is due to physiological causes.⁵⁰ Nietzsche provides specific examples of values that are a physiological expression or condition that he arrived at in the following way: “Prolonged reflection on the physiology of exhaustion forced me to ask to what extent the judgments of the exhausted had penetrated the world of values.”⁵¹ Whereas positive “chivalric-aristocratic” value judgments are based on vibrant physical activities,⁵² negative ones such as *ressentiment*,⁵³ sympathy,⁵⁴ and altruism⁵⁵ are the product of those of a weak constitution.

Nietzsche appears to hold an essentialist conception of the physiological health or sickness of the body that he thematises in terms of vitality or exhaustion, one of binary opposites that can be utilised as a criterion against which any given set of values can be evaluated. A sickness that manifests itself as an inability to deal with life’s obstacles is contrasted with a notion of health that thrives on resistance and the overcoming of obstacles. Life is a continual struggle to regain the pinnacle of “*great health*”⁵⁶ with the aim of conquering weakness and thereby becoming stronger.⁵⁷ This is a self-enforcing relationship where great health has need of sickness,⁵⁸ for health is an

⁴³ KSA: 12:2[165] = *WLN*, pp. 92-94/*WP*: 258.

⁴⁴ KSA: 10:24[31] = *WP*: 255.

⁴⁵ *Physiologie der Moral*. KSA: 11:27[14] = *MT*.

⁴⁶ A: 30.

⁴⁷ GS: 2nd Preface, 2.

⁴⁸ *BGE*: 20.

⁴⁹ *BGE*: 202.

⁵⁰ KSA: 11:34[67] = *WLN*, p. 5.

⁵¹ KSA: 13:15[13] = *WP*: 54.

⁵² *GM*: I, 7.

⁵³ *GM*: III, 15.

⁵⁴ *TI*: Skirmishes, 37.

⁵⁵ KSA: 13:14[29] = *WLN*, pp. 242-244/*WP*: 373.

⁵⁶ GS: 382.

⁵⁷ *TI*: Arrows, 8.

⁵⁸ KSA: 13:14[65] = *WP*: 47.

obstacle to rehabilitation and sickness can be a cure:⁵⁹ “for something that is typically healthy, sickness can actually be an energetic stimulus to life, to being more alive”.⁶⁰

This conception of health is utilised by Nietzsche in a number of ways. Firstly, it is a ploy to disparage any perspective that is a product of, and perpetuates, whatever he considers to be indicative of weakness.⁶¹ Secondly, it is a vehicle for a programme of psychological healing that is dependent upon a unified and harmonious functioning of the body.⁶² Thirdly, and perhaps most importantly, for Nietzsche health is a contingent physiological and psychological record of an individual. There is no such thing as normal health, and health can be used as a measure of an individual’s ability to realise the goals they have set them self.⁶³ Health is thus an essential factor in self-creation and what he calls ‘becoming who one is’.⁶⁴ Finally, Nietzsche also uses physiology as the basis for evaluations that encompass individuals and communities based on an order of rank. He presents a hierarchically based triad consisting of a mediocre majority ruled over by a minority of noble caste, who are in turn inferior to a higher type, an exceptional few who are gifted with true artistic and philosophical expression.⁶⁵

The case of decadence is a prime example of Nietzsche’s use of a physiological criterion for health and sickness. In his notebooks of 1888 Nietzsche describes decadence as fundamentally a *physiological disorder*.⁶⁶ The decadent is embodiment of physiological weakness of a type that comprises the majority of individuals.⁶⁷ Decadents are the opposite of the stronger (aristocratic) minority – the nobles (*die Vornehmen*)⁶⁸ – and even further removed from the physiologically well-constituted higher individual and ideal type that Nietzsche refers to as the Overhuman.⁶⁹ The latter is a portrayal of humanity’s struggle to attain health and strength as the precondition for an all-

⁵⁹ HH: I, Preface 5.

⁶⁰ EH: Wise, 2.

⁶¹ A: 7.

⁶² KSA: 13:14[155] = WP: 233.

⁶³ GS: 120.

⁶⁴ GS: 270 & 335.

⁶⁵ A: 57.

⁶⁶ KSA: 13:15[10] = WP: 851 & 13:17[6] = WP: 44. Cf., A: 17.

⁶⁷ TI: Skirmishes, 33, KSA: 13:15[120] = WP: 857 & 13:23[1] = WP: 734. Cf., KSA: 13:11[371] = WP: 153.

⁶⁸ GM: I, 2, 5 & 7, A: 21 & KSA: 11:40[26] = WP: 783, 13:11[239] = WP: 207 & 13:14[223] = WP: 184.

⁶⁹ A: 4, EH: Books, 1 & KSA: 13:11[138] = WLN, pp. 226-227/WP: 341.

affirming philosophy, one that can only be embraced by the physiologically robust and psychologically strong:

In order to understand this type, you first need to be clear about what he presupposes physiologically: it is what I call *great health* . . . a new health that is stronger, craftier, tougher, bolder, and more cheerful than any previous health . . . a health that one doesn't only have, but also acquires continually and must acquire because one gives it up again and again, and must give it up . . .⁷⁰

One possible reason for this physiologically based approach is that Nietzsche is attempting to provide philosophical enquiry with a scientific and distinctively non-moral evaluative vocabulary. This is because he strives to interpret moral judgments as symptomatic of varying degrees of health and decadence, and to rank them accordingly. Hence 'healthy' versus 'sick' is intended to replace 'good' versus 'evil' as the governing principle of philosophical evaluation. As a consequence, Nietzsche complements the physiologically based notions of health and sickness, with a biological notion of the centrality of life with regard to the questions of values. Life for Nietzsche can be evaluated along the lines that there exists an active, ascendant, healthy life and a reactive decadent, sickly one.⁷¹ This evaluation is undertaken by recourse to a model of causality that provides a reason for the need and choice of the type of values that are used in the first place, which is the theme I will examine next.

2.3 Nietzsche's Conception of Causality

Nietzsche's physiological standpoint, as briefly outlined in the previous section, is based on observation at the expense of abstract principles, in conjunction with a new interest in empiricism in his later works – that which cannot be derived from the senses has no real existence.⁷² Nietzsche describes the concepts of cause and effect as both "healthy"⁷³ in presenting empirical associations of

⁷⁰ *EH*: Z, 2.

⁷¹ *TJ*: Skirmishes, 33.

⁷² *BGE*: 134.

⁷³ *A*: 49.

events linked by causal dependency and also as “dangerous”, because of the difficulty in presenting a model of just why exactly they have that dependence.⁷⁴ One consequence then of his new empirical stance is that Nietzsche is interpreted as holding a sceptical view of the notion of cause and effect, since the nature of causal relation for him (as for Hume before him) is not given in experience.⁷⁵ Such an interpretation is potentially at odds with his diagnostic aspirations.⁷⁶ The concepts of cause and effect are each usually deemed as separable and stable. Nietzsche on the other hand claims each causal event is really an infinite number of processes, a reflection of his preference for a belief in perpetual becoming over being.⁷⁷ However, this does not mean Nietzsche claims there to be no such thing as a causal relation, or that he refrains from causal explanations for assorted human phenomena. Rather his clinical method is grounded in his naturalism that makes use of empirically determinable materials and principles founded on his conceptions of physiology and psychology.

Causality for Nietzsche is a phenomenon that must be understood as essentially related to our interpretive actions. First, causality requires an appeal to ideal objects, such as straight lines, that do not exist in the empirical world but are merely constructed by agents interested in explaining causality. Secondly, the regularity with which we perceive the world – that “a certain thing always succeeds another certain thing” – is a product of our minds, because “we have seen nothing but *pictures* of 'causes and effects'!”.⁷⁸ We become captivated by this picture which has instilled an idea and subsequent terminology of succession that we wish to apply everywhere, either moving forwards from cause *to* the effect, or the reverse of cause *of* the effect. Yet the importance to Nietzsche of our notion of causality is evident in the passage ‘The Four Great Errors’ from *Twilight of the Idols*. Here he debunks four traditional doctrines regarding causality: confusing the effect for the

⁷⁴ KSA: 12:9[91] = *WLN*, pp. 154-157/*WP*: 552.

⁷⁵ See Kail (2009), Leiter (2013a), Rayman (2014), Kail (2015), Leiter (2015), and Remhof (2015).

⁷⁶ KSA: 13:14[145] = *WP*: 523.

⁷⁷ *GS*: 112.

⁷⁸ *D*: 121.

cause, positing the mental as a cause, positing imaginary causes, positing the will as a 'free cause'. He assumes that these four doctrines lie at the basis of morality and religion.

The target of his scepticism concerning causality pertains to our grasp of it and its illegitimate use to construct super or non-natural causal explanations. Causality is the mechanism by which metaphysical concepts such as 'free will' are spawned,⁷⁹ and is also how our understanding of nature is misrepresented into a system of 'natural' laws. Hence, Nietzsche aims to warn against a naturalism that makes man a simple mechanism governed by cause and effect.⁸⁰ He is not advocating that there be no such conception as causation, but rather he severely doubts if we can claim to understand the causal process, especially one that uses a mechanical conception of it in terms of: 'X is the cause of Y'.

Nietzsche contrasts the conception of 'laws' of nature with a 'denatured' usage of cause and effect. He cites cases where a cause is posited that lies outside the natural order. This includes the notion of spiritual causality rather than a natural instinctive one,⁸¹ as for example where the cause of unhappiness or misfortune is construed as a sin against God, or conversely that a pleasant feeling can be generated by trusting in God.⁸² According to Nietzsche, humanity's predilection for causal attribution is in part explicable in terms of the feeling of power that it provides to counter the anxiety and fear brought on by contact with unfamiliar things or unexpected occurrences. There is a psychological need to account for such things in a familiar and reassuring way; – namely as a cause that has already been encountered, thereby offering a preferred type of explanation rather than a novel one, for "any explanation is better than none".⁸³

In response, Nietzsche's offers an empirically-based Humean critique.⁸⁴ Like Hume's view that the cause-effect relationship is formed through 'habit', Nietzsche too believes the cause-effect

⁷⁹ *TI*: Errors, 7.

⁸⁰ *GS*: 373.

⁸¹ *A*: 39.

⁸² *A*: 25.

⁸³ *TI*: Errors, 5.

⁸⁴ *KSA*: 12:2[83] = *WLN*, pp. 74-75/*WP*: 550.

relationship is not to be found as an inherent objectivity in nature but is due to our interpretation of it. Yet he goes a step further than Hume by linking the concept of causality to a prior subjective conviction. The validation of the concept of causality consists in its psychological derivation based on a subjective conviction of a causal efficacy of the will. We as doers feel that we cause a deed, and then habitually project this anthropomorphic schema everywhere.⁸⁵ Our apparent willing and effecting becomes a model for natural processes that has developed into a belief that all nature consists of mechanical pushing and pulling.⁸⁶ Nietzsche supplants this model with his conception of a network of forces:

We should not erroneously *objectify* “cause” and “effect” like the natural scientists do (and whoever else thinks naturalistically these days –) in accordance with the dominant mechanistic stupidity which would have the cause push and shove until it “effects” something; we should use “cause” and “effect” only as pure *concepts*, which is to say as conventional fictions for the purpose of description and communication, *not* explanation.⁸⁷

This reductive, mechanical usage of cause and effect, based upon a mistaken analysis of will, can lead to erroneous attempts at forward inferences of cause and then effect, and also the more insidious, backward ones, where some effect is explained by a fictitious cause:

The propositions, 'no effect without a cause', 'every effect again a cause', appear as generalizations of much narrower propositions: 'no effecting without willing' . . .⁸⁸

A generalised depiction of the abductive principle – where one starts with an observation and then seeks to find the simplest and most likely explanation – is earlier presented by Nietzsche in a passage from *Human, All Too Human*, where he argues that rationality has evolved from the logic used in the process of dreaming.⁸⁹ According to the earlier Nietzsche, a backward inference is utilised in “dream-thinking” (*Traumdenken*). When dreaming, for a person “the first plausible hypothesis for explaining

⁸⁵ KSA: 13:14[98] = WLN, pp. 251-253/WP: 551.

⁸⁶ GS: 127.

⁸⁷ BGE: 21.

⁸⁸ GS: 127.

⁸⁹ This general description is later reiterated as the basis for “*The error of imaginary causes*”, TI: Errors, 4. Cf., KSA: 13:15[90] = WLN, pp. 270-271/WP: 479.

a sensation that occurs to him is at once accepted as the truth". This inclination has then become extrapolated for use in everyday waking narrative practices. If we need to account for an unusual experience that is not readily understood then "the supposed cause is inferred from the effect", in order to draw "primitive forms of conclusion and inference and we still live about half of our life in this condition".⁹⁰

In a notebook entry a few years later Nietzsche briefly speculates that reversing the chronological order of cause and effect is simply a normal function of our brains.⁹¹

The 'external world' affects us: the effect is telegraphed into our brain, there arranged, given shape and traced back to its cause: then the cause is *projected*, and *only then does the fact enter our consciousness*. That is, the world of appearances *appears* to us as a cause only once 'it' has exerted its effect and the effect has been processed. That is, *we are constantly reversing the order of what happens*.⁹²

In a slightly earlier notebook entry Nietzsche describes how a natural inclination to seek a cause for an effect becomes generalised, eventually resulting in causal 'laws' that are really human creations and then projected onto the world:

All our mechanical laws are *from us*, not from things! We construct the "things" after them.

The synthesis "thing" stems from *us*: all the properties of the thing from *us*. "Effect and cause", is a generalization of our feeling and judgment.⁹³

These last three passages then describe what Nietzsche sees as a natural abductive tendency of working backwards from an effect to its cause in an attempt to supply an explanation to account for a given observation or occurrence. As we shall see next, Nietzsche depicts this type of reasoning

⁹⁰ HH: I, 13.

⁹¹ Nietzsche possibly appropriated this conception from Schopenhauer (2012), §22, p. 81: "The sensations of the body, then, provide the data for the initial application of the causal law and are precisely the means through which intuition of this class of objects arises. Consequently this class of objects gets its being and existence only by means of, and through the exercise of, this function of the understanding as it comes into operation."

⁹² KSA: 11:34[54] = WLN, p. 4.

⁹³ Alle unsere mechanischen Gesetze sind *aus uns*, nicht aus den Dingen! Wir construiren nach ihnen die „Dinge“. Die Synthese „Ding“ stammt von *uns*: alle Eigenschaften des Dinges von *uns*. „Wirkung und Ursache“, ist eine Verallgemeinerung unseres Gefühls und Urtheils. KSA: 11:25[427] = MT.

negatively by arguing that in this generalised form it can result in erroneous explanations based on false inferences.

2.4 Nietzsche's Negative Portrayal of Abductive Reasoning

2.4.1 The Role of Causality and Physiology

As we have seen in the preceding discussion of Nietzsche's conceptions of physiology and causality, both are of importance to his general philosophical position. In this section I will demonstrate how the two combine to provide an essential piece of apparatus in Nietzsche's depiction of the workings of decadence. However, this picture is complicated by Nietzsche's essentially negative account of abductive reasoning.

In an attempt to provide a hypothesis for some observation or feeling, one may start from some effect and work backwards to postulate a cause. However, the suggested cause can in fact be mistaken or indeed entirely fictitious, resulting in an erroneous explanation for the perceived observation. A fictitious causal attribution forms the basis of decadence, which can be defined as a *misplaced* causality indicative of a *misunderstanding* of the role of the body and its physiology. For Nietzsche, the fundamental problem with attempting to understand the nature of decadence is that the cause and effect are normally transposed: "Basic insight regarding the nature of decadence: *its supposed causes are – its consequences.*"⁹⁴

In a notebook entry from mid-1888, Nietzsche provides an example of this kind of erroneous transposition:

If he is suffering or in a good mood, he has no doubt that he can find the reason for it if only he looks. So he looks for the reason— In truth, he cannot find the reason, because he does not even suspect where he ought to look for it— What happens?— He takes a *consequence* of his condition for its *cause*; e.g., a work undertaken in a good mood (really undertaken because

⁹⁴ KSA: 13:15[31] = WP: 41.

the good mood had provided the courage for it) succeeds: *ecco*, the work is the *reason* for the good mood.— In fact, the success was determined by the same thing that determined the good mood—by the happy coordination of physiological forces and systems.⁹⁵

The passage is significant as it identifies the body as the origin of this confusion of cause for effect, and the subsequent *externalisation* of the supposed cause in psychological terms, which is in fact the product of an underlying *internal* physiological condition. A ‘good mood’ then is *not* always the result of satisfaction with the fruits of his labours as our subject supposes, but the product of the properly functioning physiology that allows him to attempt the task in the first place. Conversely a ‘bad mood’ then will be the result of a degenerating physiology rather than frustration or disappointment associated with a lack of achievement.

This example is repeated in a generalised form in *Twilight of the Idols* as one of ‘The Four Great Errors’, under the heading of ‘The error of imaginary causes’, and also the following one, ‘Psychological explanation for this’:

Most of our general feelings – every type of inhibition, pressure, tension, explosion in the give and take of our organs, and particularly the state of the *nervus sympathicus* [sympathetic nervous system] – excite our causal instinct: we want there to be a *reason why* we are in a particular state we are in, – why we are feeling good or bad.⁹⁶

We attempt to rationalise the way we feel, seeking the cause for it, especially a reassuring one if the feeling has been unpleasant. Psychological explanations are then introduced to account for what are really physiological states. Memory dictates that certain causal explanations become dominant by repeated selection and previously externalized reasons are recalled to explain physiological states. Instead of seeking the real physiological causes which operate usually unconsciously, we choose to invent fictional causes as the preferred conscious explanation, thereby providing a rational justification for feeling the way we do.

⁹⁵ KSA: 13:14[179] = WP: 229.

⁹⁶ TI: Errors, 4.

The underlying process by which this type of confusion between cause and effect arises is succinctly expressed by Nietzsche in the following way: “*Metonymy*, the substitution of cause and effect” (*Metonymie, Vertauschung von Ursache und Wirkung*).⁹⁷ The term ‘metonymy’ only appears in Nietzsche’s oeuvre between mid-1872 and mid-1873, and is discussed in his unpublished lectures on ancient rhetoric, *On Truth and Lying in a Non-Moral Sense*, and an early notebook. The general conception of metonymy, however, recurs in his subsequent writings⁹⁸ and becomes prominent in his discussion of decadence, where he often refers to the metonymic process as confusion (*Verwechslung*) or a confusing (*Verwechselt*) of cause and effect.⁹⁹ In order to elucidate the cryptic workings of this transposition of cause and effect, we need to examine Nietzsche’s early writings on metonymy. Then we can examine the manner in which he wields the general conception of metonymy as an instrumental and yet covert tool in his later descriptions of decadence. I will first clarify some terminology.

2.4.2 Metonymy as Mistaken Explanation

Metonymy, along with metaphor and synecdoche are three examples of a trope – a rhetorical device – which Nietzsche discusses in his early lectures on rhetoric. In linguistic terms tropes are words or phrases used in a new and different way in order to create an effect that supplements or embellishes a more literal statement or experience. Metonymy, metaphor and synecdoche all involve the substitution of one term for another. Metonymy for example, substitutes a word or phrase for another that is closely associated to it, and works by the contiguity between two concepts, such as ‘suit’ for business man, or ‘the big smoke’ to refer to a large industrial city. Whereas some metaphors are based on the term’s analogous similarity such as ‘He is a night owl’ for someone who stays up all night, metonymy does not normally transfer qualities from one referent to another as they do with metaphor. A further distinction can be made between synecdoche and metonymy where the former is used as the substitution of a part for a whole, for example ‘keel’ for ‘ship’. The

⁹⁷ LR: III.

⁹⁸ E.g., HH: I, 39 & 608 & GM: I, 13.

⁹⁹ TI: Errors, 1 & 6, KSA: 13:16[85], 13:16[86], 13:17[1], 13:17[6] = WP: 44 & 13:19[9].

latter is reserved for the process of substituting an attribute for the entity itself, as in 'the deep' for 'the sea'.

Nietzsche does not understand metonymy just in this traditional, rhetorical sense but rather as a constitutive element of experience itself.¹⁰⁰ He claims metonymy is essential for the processes of abstraction and the formation of concepts, and as such, is central to rational thought:

Abstractions are metonymies, i.e. inversions (*Vertauschungen*) of cause and effect. But every concept is a metonymy and knowledge takes place in concepts. 'Truth' becomes a *power* once we have isolated it as an abstraction.¹⁰¹

Metonymy is a metaphoric process that starts from the perception of certain characteristics to the creation of any abstract entity as the cause of the characteristics, such as Plato's creation of an ideal abstract form from the original exemplar material form.¹⁰² Nietzsche links this metonymic activity not just to Plato's forms, but also to what Kant refers to as synthetic judgements,¹⁰³ each being a case of positing the result of abstraction as the cause of the qualities abstracted.¹⁰⁴ For Nietzsche, metonymy can also describe a transference from the realm of sensation to that of a concept, such as sipping a bitter drink. It is not really the drink that is the cause of the bitterness. Rather the experience of a sensation of bitterness is attributed to the drink and then perceived to be the cause of the bitterness. In this example, a metonymic transference consists in starting from the effect and positing an entity as the cause of the effect. It is in this sense then, that metonymy is an attempted backward inference.

In Nietzsche's richer analysis however, metonymy denotes the substitution of cause and effect.¹⁰⁵ He views metonymies as "false inferences" from effect to cause and as the essence of all

¹⁰⁰ See Schrift (1990), pp. 130-131, Mangion (1997), pp.37-59, and Børnedal (2010), pp. 71-73.

¹⁰¹ KSA: 7:19[204] = WEN, p. 148.

¹⁰² "The *abstracta* evoke the illusion that they themselves are these essences which cause the qualities, whereas they receive a metaphorical reality only from us, because of those characteristics.", LR: VII.

¹⁰³ Kant distinguishes between 'analytic' judgements in which the 'concept of the predicate is contained in the concept of the subject' (as in 'all bachelors are unmarried'), and 'synthetic judgements' where the concept of the predicate is not contained within that of the subject, (such as in 'all bachelors have dandruff').

¹⁰⁴ KSA: 7:19[242] = WEN, p. 158.

¹⁰⁵ LR: III.

synthetic judgment.¹⁰⁶ His reasoning is that our use of language does not lead us to essences for there are only relational properties, and none that are independent of their relationship to the subject. When we define an entity according to a property which belongs to it we necessarily omit its other properties, so relations can never be the essence of the entity, but only the consequence of the essence. A synthetic judgement such as ‘All fire-fighters are courageous’ describes some entity according to its consequences because the essence and consequence become identified, so such judgements are based on confusion between the concept and the thing. We see a courageous fireman and argue that the abstract entity ‘courage’ is the cause of his being courageous: “the *audacia* [courage] causes men to be *audaces* [courageous]”.¹⁰⁷

The modern cognitive linguist George Lakoff claims “[m]etonymy is one of the basic characteristics of cognition.”¹⁰⁸ Following in his footsteps, Radden and Kövecses argue that although the directional causality of metonymic mappings are in principle reversible, effects more readily serve as metonymic vehicles than causes.¹⁰⁹ As for example, where the mental state of ‘You are a pain in the neck’ is substituted for ‘You give me pain’, i.e. the person causing it. Nietzsche pre-empted these contemporary theorists by portraying metonymy as exerting a primacy over our formation of ideas, a consequence of the unacknowledged way we interact with the world via a system of abstract concepts. For him, our linguistic ability furnishes our consciousness with a certain conceptual schema. We perceive the world of phenomena as divided into two domains of being – with agents and causes on one hand, and acts and effects on the other – and thereby provide the categories necessary for our deliberations concerning theology, philosophy and science. The early Nietzsche gives an example of the construction of these dual domains via metonymy:

Just as it is certain that no leaf is ever exactly the same as any other leaf, it is equally certain that the concept ‘leaf’ is formed by dropping these individual differences arbitrarily, by forgetting those features which differentiate one thing from another, so that the concept then

¹⁰⁶ KSA: 7:19[215] = WEN, p. 150.

¹⁰⁷ LR: VII.

¹⁰⁸ Lakoff (1987), p. 77.

¹⁰⁹ Radden and Kövecses (1999).

gives rise to the notion that something other than leaves exists in nature, something which would be 'leaf', a primal form, say, from which all leaves were woven, drawn, delineated, dyed, curled, painted – but by a clumsy pair of hands, so that no single example turned out to be a faithful, correct, and reliable copy of the primal form. We call a man honest; we ask, 'Why did he act so honestly today?' Our answer is usually: 'Because of his honesty.' Honesty! – yet again, this means that the leaf is the cause of the leaves. We have no knowledge of an essential quality which might be called honesty, but we do know of numerous individualized and hence non-equivalent actions which we equate with each other by omitting what is unlike, and which we now designate as honest actions; finally we formulate from them a *qualitas occulta* [hidden property] with the name 'honesty'.¹¹⁰

Metonymy then concurrently separates reality into two domains, where agents engage in acts, causes have effects, and substances have qualities. Using this differentiation as foundation, a re-representation of a given discrete entity of reality is formed as products of these two domains. Thereby the individual entity ceases to be just that entity, but becomes either an effect for a cause, or a member of a class. This division allows not only for generic knowledge, it is also the means by which the transferences themselves take on an independent existence of their own.

More formally put, from the effect of the thing we formulate a concept which we believe tells us what the essence of the thing is. However, for Nietzsche this is not the case since the domain of the concept and that of the thing can never simply be equated – they are from two different domains – and the association between these domains is not one of identity. Instead it involves a metaphoric transference from an ontological realm to an abstract-conceptual one:

Metonymy, the placement of one noun for another . . . the abstract *substantiva* are qualities inside us and outside us and around us, which are torn away from the substrata and set forth as independent essence . . . These concepts, which owe their origin only to our experiences,

¹¹⁰ TL: 1.

are proposed *a priori* to be the intrinsic essences of the things; we attribute to the appearances as their cause that which still is only an effect.¹¹¹

Nietzsche is making the following argument here based on the meaning of words and concepts as tropes. Tropes are less dependent on the apparent correspondence between the terms and the objects than the possibility of exchange between the terms. The source of an abstract term is situated in a tropological system of exchange, whereby sensations that we place as either inside or around us are projected onto an abstract quality or concept that is believed to be the cause of the quality itself. Abstract nouns – such as ‘courage’ or the ‘ego’ associated with ‘I’ – are conceived as causes are exposed as simply effects of effects. This is the essential element of his early theory of tropes and it is repeated many years later in a passage from *Twilight of the Idols*, to illustrate that language is the persistent catalyst of conceptual mistakes:

Language began at a time when psychology was in its most rudimentary form: we enter into a crudely fetishistic mind set when we call into consciousness the basic presuppositions of the metaphysics of language – in the vernacular: the presuppositions of *reason*. It sees doers and deeds all over: it believes that will has causal efficacy: it believes in the 'I', in the I as being, in the I as substance, and it *projects* this belief in the I-substance onto all things – this is how it *creates* the concept of 'thing' in the first place . . . Being is imagined into everything – *pushed under everything* – as a cause; the concept of 'being' is only derived from the concept of 'I' . . .¹¹²

For Nietzsche, a characteristic of the way language functions is to process a number of perceptions of separate actions and to then abstract away the qualitative differences and uniqueness of each of them, and thereby the quantity. As a result they are formed into a single concept via the abstracting process of language. In short, a number of perceived effects are bound together and incorporated into a sole qualitative name, with the quality being taken as the cause. Nietzsche believes this

¹¹¹ LR: VII.

¹¹² TI: Reason, 5.

account shows that the language and concepts that we use to explain reality have a metaphoric origin and are founded on logically invalid inferences.¹¹³ As the early Nietzsche proclaims, our attempts at rational discourse are undermined when its inherent nature is illogical: “the essence of language [is] *logical fallacies*. That is where reason begins!”¹¹⁴ Moreover, these invalid inferences are then used to support our belief in specific moral values. One of the consequences of the metonymic basis of language is that of an imposed metaphysical unity of things, where a series of perceptions are abstracted into a concept which in turn becomes the cause of the properties perceived.¹¹⁵

The metonymic basis of language that is originally stated in his early writings on rhetoric has a further consequence that can be discerned in the quote above from *Twilight of the Idols*. A trait of consciousness, the seeming unity of the ego, is projected as the cause of the unity in the form of the notion of being. The notion of being is then found to be anomalous, and not a cause at all, but an effect of an effect. This mistake is compounded by philosophers’ interpretation of this error – of being as a rational concept – as “a *certainty*, a subjective *assurance*”, when it is actually the error of an error; our understanding of the world around us utilises the distinction of cause and effect, which is already the product of an error: for what is commonly called ‘causality’ is in fact really a linguistic tropological structure.¹¹⁶ An appreciation of this linguistic basis then undermines the whole enterprise of metaphysics that is based on one of binary logic of either/or choices, such as cause and effect, before and after, inside and outside *etc.* Thereby Nietzsche recycles the same rhetorical structure initially used as an explanation for the invention of the Platonic idea in his early lectures on rhetoric, to account for the production of concept of being in his later period.

¹¹³ Such an interpretation potentially provides more material for the debate known as the ‘falsification thesis’ initiated by Clark (1990). Nietzsche gives the impression that all human beliefs are false, *e.g.*: “truths are illusions of which we have forgotten that they are illusions”, *TL*: 1. Clark tries to limit Nietzsche’s commitment to this thesis to *BT*, *TL* & *UM*, by claiming that henceforth he then questions it, particularly in *HH*, and abandons the thesis altogether from *GM* onwards. By contrast, Nehamas (2017) argues that Nietzsche never held such a thesis.

¹¹⁴ *KSA*: 7:19[215] = *WEN*, p. 150.

¹¹⁵ *KSA*: 12:2[87] = *WLN*, p. 76/*WP*: 561.

¹¹⁶ *TI*: Reason, 5.

In this section we have examined the early Nietzsche's presentation of metonymy and its inherent abductive nature of 'effect then cause' that leads to erroneous inferences. I will next examine how the general conception of metonymy is later applied in his discussion of decadence.

2.4.3 The Correlation between Metonymy, Physiology and Decadence

Nietzsche no longer uses the term 'metonymy' in his later writings but he reiterates its functionality as outlined at the beginning of this section – a metonymic transference consists of making an error of reasoning due to confusing cause and effect. His application of what I would like to call *metonymic arguments* is enshrined in his later terminology, and as I shall argue, is critical to his exposition of decadence. This is especially so with regard to its manifestation in the forms of morality and religion.¹¹⁷ Metonymic transference masks the real nature of physiological origins of religious morality:

One confuses cause and effect: one fails to understand decadence as a physiological condition (*nicht als physiologisch*) and mistakes its consequences for the real cause of the indisposition; example: all of religious morality.¹¹⁸

Hence, as outlined in the beginning of this section, Nietzsche's use of this type of argument in his later philosophy gives it an apparently novel characteristic – one that follows from making a connection between physiology and metonymy – which is the identification of the body as the origin of the confusion of cause for effect. As sketched out in Chapter 1.3.3 by the anti-reality formula – and to be discussed in more detail in Chapter 4 examining the effects of decadence – the heart of Nietzsche's critique of decadence is directed at those whose declining physiological condition is such that it causes them to deny the actual world, and replace it with a set of beliefs that pertain to a fictitious and ideal one instead.¹¹⁹ Nietzsche cites an example concerning an Italian writer called Luigi Cornaro who made the claim that a meagre diet was the cause of a long and happy life. In

¹¹⁷ *TJ*: Errors, 1 & 6.

¹¹⁸ *KSA*: 13:17[6] = *WP*: 44.

¹¹⁹ *A*: 15.

Nietzsche's view it is was rather Cornaro's physiological constitution and requirements that dictated him to adopt a particular kind of diet rather than one made from free choice:

This conscientious Italian thought that his diet was the *cause* of his longevity: but the preconditions for a long life – an exceptionally slow metabolism and a minimal level of consumption – were in fact the cause of his meagre diet. He was not free to eat *either* a little *or* a lot, his frugality was *not* 'freely willed': he got sick when he ate more.¹²⁰

For Nietzsche this is an example of confusing cause and effect and is an instance of a metonymic transference where perceived effects upon entities are postulated as the cause of those effects.

Nietzsche states that there is no error more insidious than this type of confusion, for its use is persuasive and is the basis of all religion and morality:

The error of confusing cause and effect. – No error is more dangerous than that of confusing *the cause with the effect*: I call it genuine destruction of reason. Nevertheless, this error can be found in both the oldest and newest habits of humanity: we even sanctify it and call it 'religion' and 'morality'. It can be found in every single claim formulated by religion and morality; priests and legislators of moral law are the authors of this destruction of reason.¹²¹

In particular, the creation of a false causality where all effects are believed to be caused by will, can lead to accrediting God as the cause of otherwise seemingly inexplicable strong feelings of power induced in a person ignorant of the true underlying physiological causes; a move from psychology to ontology/theology on their part:

[I]n the psychological formation of God, a state is personified as a cause in order to be an effect. The psychological logic is this: *the feeling of power*, when it suddenly and overwhelmingly overruns a man – and this is the case in all great affects – makes him doubt his own person: he doesn't dare think of himself as the cause of this astonishing feeling – and

¹²⁰ *TJ*: Errors, 1.

¹²¹ *TJ*: Errors, 1.

so he posits a *stronger* person, a divinity, to explain it. In sum: the origin of religion lies in the extreme feelings of power which take man by surprise as *alien* . . .¹²²

Behaving virtuously according to God's law is supposed to cause happiness, but those who are happy are actually predisposed to happiness because of their constitution, which causes them to behave virtuously. However, those of a weakened state are the driving force for the creation of religious and moral conceptions such as God, the soul, and free will by theologians and circulated and upheld by the priesthood. Any failure to correctly embrace these and their associated customs includes a set of illusory causes that 'explains' an individual's unpleasant feelings, suffering and failed actions as transgressions requiring punishment, such as sin, guilt, contrition, evil and purgatory. Conversely, relief from suffering and positive feelings are likewise explained as a reward for the correct observance of these practices, with the possibility of forgiveness, redemption and an after-life as the ultimate reward.¹²³ Within this erroneous interpretative framework bad feelings can be caused by 'evil spirits', good ones by 'trusting in God'. In both cases the explanations involve a metonymic transference from sensation to an external entity which is subsequently renamed and postulated as the cause of the sensations.¹²⁴

Illuminating the metonymic basis of religious and moral edicts is an important element in Nietzsche's projected reassessment of values. A person's character and actions are not to be described or judged by external imposed religious imperatives and prescriptive morals and ideals. For Nietzsche, the criterion to be used is not what one ought to become, but rather what one is. This is because a person's physiology is an important dynamic in the behaviour of the individual, so for him it follows that vice is not a cause but rather a consequence of physiological degeneration.¹²⁵ Nietzsche attacks 'free will' as a theological invention employing a false causality to make a person accountable for their actions, and is accompanied by the gratuitous yet controlling notions of guilt and punishment.

¹²² KSA: 13:14[124] = *WLN*, pp. 260-261/*WP*: 135.

¹²³ *TI*: Errors, 2 & KSA: 13:14[179] = *WP*: 229.

¹²⁴ *TI*: Errors, 6.

¹²⁵ KSA: 13:14[113] = *WP*: 334.

Examples of metonymic transference abound in Nietzsche's portrayal of decadence. The ascetic, who rejects the world and life because he deems them as the cause, and his suffering is the effect, is another example of the substitution of cause and effect. Such a weakened physiological condition is also what Brian Leiter calls the 'deep cause'¹²⁶ of the suffering that results in the resentment that is the trait of the slave's morality, who cathartically attributes the cause¹²⁷ to the external entity of their noble masters.¹²⁸ The same explanation applies to the suffering disingenuously posited by religious interpretation to be the product of an abstract conception of guilt and man's due punishment.¹²⁹

By examining the role of the socio-political, cultural, religious entities and values of modernity, Nietzsche produces a critique that interprets religious morality, democracy, socialism, anarchism, romanticism, nihilism, and pessimism, all as signs of the decadence inherent within that contemporary society. Nietzsche's interpretation sees these cultural entities as signs of decline, an externalisation of the fundamental underlying cause which is the decaying physiological condition of mankind:

[T]he question is debated whether pessimism or optimism is right, as if there must be answers to that. One fails to see, although it could hardly be more obvious, that pessimism is not a problem but a symptom . . . that the question whether not to – be is better than to be is itself a disease, a sign of decline, an idiosyncrasy.¹³⁰

For Nietzsche, the then contemporary yet 'neurotic' pervasive pseudo-scientific theory that a *milieu* – a person's social environment – is the cause of genius is just another case of false causality, and

¹²⁶ Leiter (2015), p. 126. This is linked to Leiter's ascription to Nietzsche of a kind of fatalism that he terms 'causal essentialism', pp. 65-66 & p. 78. The destiny of a person is analogous to the way the shape of a plant is determined by a combination of the innate growth potential encoded in its genetic makeup, together with the prevailing environmental conditions, as discussed when examining his conception of 'type-facts' in Chapter 1.5. Leiter's position is strongly contested by Anderson (2013).

¹²⁷ *GM*: III, 15.

¹²⁸ *GM*: I, 10.

¹²⁹ *GM*: III, 21.

¹³⁰ *KSA*: 13:17[8] = *WP*: 38.

another example of a metonymic transference.¹³¹ For this view is the result of the mistake of taking genius as the effect and moving to an external factor, the social context as a cause of that effect.¹³² For Nietzsche, again, the deep cause is physiological and for him the theory is born out of decadence.¹³³ He argues that genius is the product of an accumulation of energy over time, and that the social context provides the 'spark' to ignite the latent force of what is already present.¹³⁴

To summarise, like any abductive reasoning, the metonymic form relies on associative links among conceptual entities, although it is questionable whether metonymy is comparable to abduction in all respects as outlined in the two previous sections. For instance, the key element of abduction is the explanatory property, which does not align very well with the view that metonymy is a means for constructing and inferring meanings. Rather metonymy primarily functions as a referential device, and its purpose is not to provide explanations for how the world functions. However, Nietzsche's distinctive conception of metonymy includes metaphoric and implicating properties that contain this explanatory function in its attempt to link an effect to a cause. For what then takes place is a substitution of cause and effect, with the result that the explanation offered is a mistaken one. Using this interpretation of metonymy, it is possible to view it as an example of a failed abductive inference.

In this section I have presented Nietzsche's distinctive depiction of the functioning of metonymy as essential to his negative account of the use of abductive reasoning; one that is founded upon an explicit depiction of causality as a cause derived from an effect that turns out to be erroneous, and for example, masks the true physiological basis of decadence. I will next turn to elucidating Nietzsche's more positive account of abduction. This account includes using a more implicit effect then cause relationship as the basis for his hypothesis concerning the physiological basis of decadence, one that is redolent of a medical diagnosis.

¹³¹ *TI*: Skirmishes, 44.

¹³² *KSA*: 12:2[175] = *WLN*, pp. 94-95/*WP*: 70.

¹³³ *KSA*: 13:15[105].

¹³⁴ *TI*: Skirmishes, 44.

2.5 Nietzsche's Positive Portrayal of Abductive Reasoning

2.5.1 A Backward Inference as a Method of Explanation

In an aphorism from *Nietzsche contra Wagner* entitled 'We Antipodes', Nietzsche provides a concise summary of his general method of exposition of decadence that is tacitly presented in his mature works.¹³⁵ His method is founded on the observation that life is full of inherent suffering, and that aesthetic and philosophical works are a response to this predicament. The question to be asked of works of art and philosophy concerns the way they reflect the values of their creator. Are these artefacts expressions symptomatic of an embracing of life, or are they merely a means of comfort, symptomatic of a rejection of life?

Every art, every philosophy can be considered a cure and aid in the service of growing or declining life: it always presupposes suffering and sufferers. But there are two types of sufferers: first, those who suffer from a *superabundance* of life – they want a Dionysian art as well as a tragic outlook and insight into life – then, those who suffer from an *impoverishment* of life and demand quiet, stillness, calm seas *or else* intoxication, paroxysm, stupor from art and philosophy.

Nietzsche seeks to address the same question with regard to other values, such as those of morality and religion. This approach of exploring the utility and function of these values is undertaken by using the pivotal, but potentially dangerous and error-generating mechanism of a *backward inference*. One that proceeds from effect to cause, and provides the reason for the need and choice of the type of values that are used in the first place:

If I have any advantage over other psychologists, it is that my vision is keener for that most difficult and insidious form of *backward inference* (*Rückschlusses*) with which the most mistakes are made – the [backward] inference from the work to the maker, from the deed to the doer, from the ideal to the one who *needs it*, from every manner of thinking and valuing to the commanding *need* behind it. – Nowadays I avail myself of this primary distinction

¹³⁵ NCW: Antipodes.

concerning artists of every type: is it *hatred* of life or *superabundance* of life that has become creative here? In Goethe, for instance, superabundance has become creative, in Flaubert it is hatred . . .¹³⁶

By making a backward inference, for example, from the work to the maker Nietzsche uses an aesthetic criterion of what is to be considered admirable, one that is founded on the parameters of strength and weakness.

Nietzsche uses the criterion of strength and weakness to encompass not just works of art or philosophy but to include many ways of thinking and valuing. One can infer back from the deed to the doer, and in the case of morality and religion, from the ideal to those who need it. The notion of ideals, such as those of God and morality, is thereby incorporated into the question of the conditions and circumstances from which they grew. Using this criterion, Nietzsche argues the creator's ideals reflect their underlying nature. He progresses to label as weak and unquestioning those ideals that are the product of a type of person who is in no condition to affirm the realities of life. Instead of embracing life, a weak individual is in need of some sort of anaesthetic as a form of escape or even redemption from life.

Nietzsche's notion of decadence and to a large degree his whole mature philosophy, can be interpreted as revolving around two distinctions – one concerning life and the other regarding ideals – both of which he considers to be discernible in some unusual phenomena. The first distinction is between those who express or display 'hatred' rather than 'superabundance' for life, which Nietzsche believes reflects their respective inability versus capacity to cope with life and forge one worth living. The second distinction is between ideals pertaining to a yearning for a fictitious and supposedly worthier world inherited from Christian-Platonic metaphysics, in contrast to those reflecting an acceptance of reality. The general line of reasoning generating these two distinctions on life and ideals can be formulated in the following way:

¹³⁶ NCW: Antipodes.

The surprising fact, C, is observed.

But if A [an explanatory hypothesis] were true, C would be a matter of course.

Hence, there is reason to suspect that A is true.

This is one basic way of formulating a mode of inference where explanations are generated to account for anomalous or surprising facts or phenomena, as presented by Charles Sanders Peirce in his *Lectures on Pragmatism* from 1903.¹³⁷ For Peirce, scientific method begins with a hypothesis arrived at by abduction,¹³⁸ the logical nature of which I will now elucidate.¹³⁹

Abductive reasoning progresses from an observed result, invokes a law and infers that something might be the case. A simple example based on an unsurprising premise is this: the fact that Socrates is dead is related to the general law that all human beings are mortal – and the inference can be made that Socrates was a human being. More typically, the surprising facts that motivated the abduction must eventually come out as no surprise in order for the hypothesis to be valid, though of course it may nonetheless be false; what is only stated is that the suggested explanatory hypothesis accommodates the facts in the premise – in this example, that Socrates is dead.¹⁴⁰ Therefore according to Peirce, “a hypothesis adopted by abduction could only be adopted on probation, and must be tested.”¹⁴¹

A specific instance of Peirce’s general formulation is inadvertently anticipated by Nietzsche in a notebook entry headed ‘Most general types of decadence’ from mid-1888. Within this entry one can also discern the two distinctions regarding opposing views on life and their corresponding ideals:

¹³⁷ Peirce (1998b), p. 231. Peirce also calls his general notion of abduction, ‘retroduction’ and ‘hypothesis’.

¹³⁸ Peirce (1998a), p. 106.

¹³⁹ We should note in passing that abduction and a related form of reasoning known as Inference to Best Explanation (IBE) are not synonymous. Abduction is about *conjecturing*, a method for *generating* hypotheses (or more generally concepts) for subsequent selection and testing that corresponds to the *first* stages of inquiry. IBE by comparison is similar but more concerned with *evaluating* hypotheses, such that the focus becomes the *last* stages of inquiry. See Campos (2011) and McAuliffe (2015).

¹⁴⁰ Abduction is not the application of a rule to a case, for if it were it would be a deductive fallacy, that of affirming the consequent. *E.g.*: If I have the flu, then I have a sore throat. I have a sore throat. Therefore, I have the flu. However, having the flu is not the only cause of a sore throat since many illnesses cause sore throat.

¹⁴¹ Peirce (1998a), p. 95.

One longs for a condition in which one no longer suffers: life is actually experienced as the ground of ills; one esteems unconscious states, without feeling, (sleep, fainting) as incomparably more valuable than conscious ones; from this a method—¹⁴²

To my knowledge no other commentator on Nietzsche's conception of decadence has drawn attention to this passage, which I will now analyse to show how Nietzsche's stated method is analogous to the example pattern of Peirce's abductive inference given above.

The surprising fact 'C' is Nietzsche's observation that some individuals hold what he considers a curious and unrealistic ideal: "One longs for a condition in which one no longer suffers" – let's call it the 'no-suffering ideal'. Nietzsche proposes an explanatory hypothesis of 'A' to account for this observation. Such an individual is life-averse because he views life as the source of suffering: "life is actually experienced as the ground of ills". The explanatory hypothesis 'A' – this supposition of repugnance with life – would appear to be true as it is reflected in other examples of surprising facts similar to 'C' that are indicative of this unrealistic ideal, such as those expressing a preference to disengage from the normal experience of life in order not to suffer: "one esteems unconscious states, without feeling, (sleep, fainting) as incomparably more valuable than conscious ones". Hence there is reason to suspect that 'A' is true – 'C', people who hold the no-suffering ideal are 'A', life-averse. He concludes the entry with the phrase "from this a method", which I propose to read as indicating the way Nietzsche will proceed to unravel the phenomenon that is decadence.

We saw in the previous section Nietzsche's negative depiction of abduction where he highlights the dangers of abductive reasoning in his take on the functioning of metonymy. By contrast, the passage from *Nietzsche contra Wagner* together with the notebook entry from mid-1888 illustrates Nietzsche's positive depiction of this kind of reasoning. This abductive form of inference manifests itself in two further techniques that Nietzsche employs to explain decadence. These are his use of genealogy that functions in conjunction with symptomatology. Both can be seen

¹⁴² KSA: 13:17[6] = WP: 44.

as grounded in his wider conception of physiology, and his unusual use of causality. I will begin with a brief discussion of the former, before turning to discuss the latter in more detail.

2.5.2 Genealogy as Explanation

The genealogical method is an attempt to trace the generation of a belief or a valuation, by construing them as symptomatic of a hidden causal mechanism. Such an approach is undertaken by examining the history of the need for these truths and values, and the changing nature of their meaning.¹⁴³ So rather than focusing on *how* some judgements, such as those of a synthetic *a priori* nature are possible, Nietzsche instead focuses on *why* the belief in certain judgements – especially value judgements – are so persuasive and necessary and he seeks to unravel the secret of their longevity. To achieve this aim he questions rather than strengthens metaphysical techniques that assume the continued and unchanging validity of their methods and beliefs.¹⁴⁴

Nietzsche's use of genealogy is well-known in his discussion of morality in *The Genealogy* and genealogical interpretations figure prominently across most of his later works. For example, *Twilight of the Idols* offers a revision of modernity, *The Anti-Christ* one of Jesus and Christianity, and *Ecce Homo*, one of himself. A general concern central to each genealogy is the problem of how the strong lose in a battle against the weak, and the manner in which the weak re-evaluate and impose their value system on the strong.¹⁴⁵ These genealogical interpretations are explanatory accounts of a particular set of beliefs, practices or phenomena that involve situating agents with a particular perspective in a socio-historical environment. Each one works *backwards* through their subject's history describing the changes that each adopts and especially their preceding forms, investigating their evolution and striving to uncover their provenance and origins. The subject is found to emerge from a conjunction of a number of diverse lines of development, with no unequivocal beginning or single underlying cause. In doing so, genealogies examine the conditions and circumstances under

¹⁴³ See Geuss (1994).

¹⁴⁴ *BGE*: 11.

¹⁴⁵ Arguably, in the case of Nietzsche's genealogical analysis of himself, this battle is reversed.

which values emerged, and then proceed to critique their instrumental worth.¹⁴⁶ The result is to show that the values are a product of a socio-historical conflict immured in a power struggle, and to expose the worth of the prior valuations with a view to their revaluation for future use.

Nietzsche's analysis of decadence within his later works is partially a genealogical critique that is woven out of the strands of those examples cited above. His analysis attempts to describe the emergence of the ethos of the past and present thought and practices, via three layers of investigation which increase in importance as one descends to unravel the foundations of decadence. Firstly, he exposes the *socio-historical context* in which decadence manifests itself as cultural decline. One example is Nietzsche citing Socrates' influence as symptomatic of the corruption of Athenian life. Another example is Nietzsche's presentation of the proliferation of democratic reforms and the rise of liberal ideals, as symptoms of the decay of contemporary political institutions and of European culture in general. Secondly, we have a *psychological analysis* in which the drives and instincts of an individual (or group) act as a guide to enable decryption of the meaning of the symptoms contained in their beliefs, values and ideologies, such as the controlling credo of the ascetic priest. Thirdly, there is a further *physiological analysis* that exposes the debilitated condition of the afflicted that necessitates the use of certain views, such as the use of dialectics by Socrates as means of coping with life due to the anarchy of his instincts.

These socio-historical, psychological and physiological aspects attempt to delineate the shifting forces behind the evolution of these beliefs, values and ideologies, thereby disassembling the apparent unity of a phenomenon and explaining its morphology. Nietzsche takes representative exemplars of an age and works backwards via *symptoms*, to assess cultural preconditions. His genealogical interpretations rely on gathering empirical data that could be described as 'case histories', which become a driving element of his critique that runs through these socio-historical, psychological and physiological layers. As such, Nietzsche's genealogical method can be viewed as an example of an interpretive inference or theory-forming that goes from some end result or data – in

¹⁴⁶ GM: Preface, 6.

the broadest sense of the word – to a hypothesis that (best) explains or accounts for the result or data. It is in this sense that Nietzsche’s general genealogical method is abductive in nature. I will next look at Nietzsche’s use of symptomatology.

2.5.3 Symptomatology as Explanation

Abduction can also be theorised as a semiotic device.¹⁴⁷ Semiotics is the study of symbols and signs and their use or interpretation, and in the case of abduction, explanatory hypotheses are signs.¹⁴⁸ Just like a surprising fact, a sign is construed as an effect signifying a particular underlying cause, for example, in the way smoke is indicative of fire. In the retrospective preface to *Human, All too Human* written in 1886, Nietzsche characterizes the psychologist as a “reader of signs” (*Zeichendeuter*).¹⁴⁹ For him, the phenomenon of man is best comprehended as a semiological puzzle, a jumble of signs requiring interpretation through the abductive approach of a symptomatology¹⁵⁰ (*eine Symptomatologie*).¹⁵¹ For Nietzsche, the latter term refers to the expressions and signs that are outwardly exhibited by the behaviour of an individual. Nietzsche construes this behaviour as symptoms and characteristic of a hidden physiological condition within their ‘soul’, one that arises from a malfunctioning of the individual’s drives and instincts. The initial step of diagnosis – be it of a medical or general fault-finding nature – uses the logic of hypothesis formation in the following way. Abductive reasoning is invoked to provide an explanation of a particular fact, by finding some prominent features of the particular that allow it to be explained by some more general causal principle. Nietzsche’s diagnosis of these symptoms then is a more implicit portrayal of causality – for the latter terminology is infrequently used – one where our moral judgements can be discerned as effects that have been caused by underlying physiological processes. Occasionally, he does use the expected terminology to make this causal association far more obvious, as for example when in *The*

¹⁴⁷ Deely (1990), p. 6 & p. 30. “[T]he Interpretant of the Abduction, represents the Abduction to be a Symbol,—to convey a general concept of the truth”, Peirce (1998c), *Sundry Logical Conceptions*, p. 287.

¹⁴⁸ Campos (2011), p. 429.

¹⁴⁹ *HH*: I, Preface, 8. Literally: ‘a diviner of signs’.

¹⁵⁰ See Hunt (1991) p. 86, and Conway (1997), pp. 53-54 & pp. 79-85.

¹⁵¹ *KSA*: 12:2[69] = *WLN*, pp. 71-72. *Cf.*, *TI*: Improvers, 1.

Genealogy he discusses the kind of morality that arises out of “the actual physiological causation of *ressentiment*”.¹⁵²

The term ‘symptomatology’ first appears in a notebook entry from 1885 where Nietzsche states that the signs interpreted by natural science are only meaningful within the framework of competing forces.¹⁵³ This assumption probably helps drive the development of his own account for the propagating and discharging of native vitality of an organism, that finds its principal expression in his writings as ‘will to power’. Another entry from the same period states that movements and thoughts are to be construed as symptoms, but behind them is a demonstrable desire of motivation – or lack of it – that is this will to power.¹⁵⁴ However, Nietzsche uses various descriptions for the fundamental constitutive forces of human agency aside from will to power or vitality that include affect, energy, force, power, strength, health and life and will.¹⁵⁵ This general notion of vitality is the basis of Nietzsche’s dichotomies of strong versus weak and the later variant of healthy versus decadent, together with the assorted normative judgments that he advances. For him, most value judgements are ultimately reducible to a measure of the native vitality involuntarily expressed by the ‘soul’ – the body’s drives and instincts. Explicitly linking his symptomatology with his physiology he maintains that “[i]ndividuals can be seen as representing either the ascending or the descending line of life”.¹⁵⁶ The mature Nietzsche asserts the centrality of life with regard to the questions of values, and in turn renders values in terms of symptoms of life. A notebook entry from 1886 outlining his thoughts on a retrospective preface to *Daybreak* acknowledges the latter as his first attempt to associate morality with the general description of a symptomatology:

My attempt to understand moral judgements as symptoms and sign languages in which appear processes of physiological thriving or failure as well as consciousness of the conditions

¹⁵² *GM*: III, 15.

¹⁵³ *KSA*: 12:2[69] = *WLN*, p. 71-72.

¹⁵⁴ *KSA*: 12:1[59].

¹⁵⁵ *E.g.*, *EH*: *Wise*, 1 & *CW*: 2nd Postscript, for the individual, and *KSA*: 12:1[236] = *WP*: 58 & *TI*: *Skirmishes*, 37 for contemporary culture.

¹⁵⁶ *TI*: *Skirmishes*, 33.

of preservation and growth . . . prejudices prompted by the whispers of instincts (of races, communities, of different phases such as youth, withering, etc.)¹⁵⁷

Although a later entry shows that he contemplates dedicating a chapter of his abortive book *Will to Power* to a 'Symptomatology of Decline',¹⁵⁸ it is not until *Twilight of the Idols* that this general depiction is reiterated in conjunction with the term 'symptomatology'. Here he principally interprets moral judgements as symptomatic of a varying degree of decadence,¹⁵⁹ and ranks them accordingly:

[M]oral judgments should never be taken literally: on their own, they are just absurdities. But *semiotically*, they are invaluable: if you know what to look for, moral judgments reveal the most valuable realities of the cultures and interiorities that did not *know* enough to 'understand' themselves. Morality is just a sign language, just a symptomatology: you have to know *what* it means in order to take advantage of it.¹⁶⁰

The values advocated by someone are informative about the nature of their life in the same way as a boy's voice breaking is indicative of the onset of puberty.

Using this method, Nietzsche then goes on to question the nature of values and the condition under which values arose, which is a precursor to tackling the issue of the value of such judgements, *i.e.* the value or worth of values.¹⁶¹ Nietzsche's claim is that human beings 'created' or established value judgements and that they stem largely from tangible conditions born from life. In short, values are indicative of the kind life lived:

The unconscious disguise of physiological needs under the cloaks of the objective, ideal, purely spiritual goes frighteningly far – and I have asked myself often enough whether, on a grand scale, philosophy has been no more than an interpretation of the body and a *misunderstanding of the body*. Behind the highest value judgements that have hitherto guided

¹⁵⁷ KSA: 12:2[165] = *WLN*, pp. 92-94/*WP*: 258. Cf., *BGE*: 187 & *GM*: Preface, 3.

¹⁵⁸ Symptomatology des Niedergangs. KSA: 13:16[86] = *MT*.

¹⁵⁹ Leiter (2013b) discusses Nietzsche's idea that moralities and moral judgments are 'sign-languages' or 'symptoms' of our affects, but makes no mention of decadence.

¹⁶⁰ *TI*: Improvers, 1.

¹⁶¹ *GM*: Preface 3.

the history of thought are concealed misunderstandings of the physical constitution – of individuals or classes or even whole races. All those bold lunacies of metaphysics, especially answers to the question about the *value* of existence, may always be considered first of all as symptoms of certain *bodies*; and if such world affirmations or world negations lack altogether any grain of significance when measured scientifically, they give the historian and psychologist all the more valuable hints as symptoms of the body, of its success or failure, its fullness, power and high-handedness in history, or of its frustrations, fatigues, impoverishments, its premonitions of the end, its will to an end.¹⁶²

A life-affirming or ‘healthy’ morality is one dominated by a natural instinct for life, where its goals and values promote life. Life then is the only thing that is good in itself and is the standard by which the value of everything else is to be measured. Nietzsche defends his naturalism by criticising the alternative – an ‘anti-morality’ – that values the non-naturalistic such as asceticism, and which promotes ascetic ideals that go against the instincts of life. His critique begins by describing asceticism’s requirement to refrain from seeking and attaining some of the basic needs of the human organism in the pursuit of unhealthy motives, which are characterised by negative notions of sin and guilt.¹⁶³ These result in some undesirable consequences that endorse something other than life, thereby implying some sort of condemnation of life.¹⁶⁴ For Nietzsche, asceticism does not promote life, and at best preserves it.¹⁶⁵

‘Life’ then is central to Nietzsche’s project and his notion of life gives the impression that for him there is a distinctive connection between it and the issue of the worth of value judgements:

In the narrower sphere of so-called moral values you will not find a greater contrast than between *master-morality* and the morality of *Christian* value concepts . . . master morality (‘Roman’, ‘heroic’, ‘classical’, ‘Renaissance’) is the sign language of a sound constitution, of

¹⁶² GS: 2nd Preface, 2.

¹⁶³ GM: III, 16.

¹⁶⁴ TI: Morality, 4.

¹⁶⁵ GM: III, 13.

ascending life, of the will to power as the principle of life. Master morality *affirms* just as instinctively as Christian morality *negates* ('God', 'beyond', 'selflessness' are pure negations). The former shares its fullness with things – it transfigures and enhances the world and makes it *rational* –, the later impoverishes the value of things and makes them pale and ugly, it *negates* the world.¹⁶⁶

As we briefly saw in Chapter 1.4.1, Nietzsche claims that the rationalising process that attempts to place a value on life as exemplified by particular philosophers, effectuates decadence. If many of the wisest men across the ages have arrived at the same conclusion about life – “it’s *no good*” – then this is for him a typical symptom of the presence of decadence, because the judgement is evidently “full of doubt, full of melancholy, full of exhaustion with life, full of resistance to life.”¹⁶⁷ Someone with a positive take on existence conveys a healthy and affirmative disposition, whereas one displaying a weary predilection is indicative of someone fatigued and life-averse. Nietzsche’s symptomatology summarily reduces most philosophical judgements – for and against life – to signs or symptoms of an underlying physiological condition:

[T]he great sages are *types of decline* . . . I recognized Socrates and Plato as symptoms of decay, as agents of Greek disintegration . . . it proves that they were in *physiological* agreement about something, and consequently adopted – *had* to adopt – the same negative attitude towards life. Judgments, value judgments on life, for or against, can ultimately never be true: they have value only as symptoms, they can be taken seriously only as symptoms, – in themselves, judgements like these are stupidities . . . *the value of life cannot be estimated*. Not by the living, who are an interested party, a bone of contention, even, and not judges, not by the dead for other reasons. – It is an objection to a philosopher if he sees a problem with the

¹⁶⁶ CW: Epilogue.

¹⁶⁷ TI: Socrates, 1.

value of life, it is a question mark on his wisdom, an un-wisdom. – What? So not only were the great sages all decadents but – they weren’t even sages?¹⁶⁸

For Nietzsche, these attempts at valuing life largely stem from a rejection of the world in general. Nietzsche’s diagnosis is what might be termed as the end effect, which is humanity’s propensity to generate values that falsify and devalue life and the world, and it is a reaction to the true underlying cause. This cause is not the abundance of suffering in the world but rather the holder’s inherent weakness to deal with it. The most common response is one born out of weakness in the face of life: to turn away from life, and to look for ‘cures’ or ‘sedatives’ to ease the passage through it.¹⁶⁹ Instead, conveyed in his notion of the Dionysian, Nietzsche advocates that we should acknowledge, embrace and overcome the inherent suffering and tragic nature of existence as identified by pessimism. One must affirm life by accepting one’s fate, transfiguring it through celebration and gratitude for having existed at all – to demonstrate a Dionysian pessimism of strength¹⁷⁰ as personified by Nietzsche’s favourite – Goethe.¹⁷¹

By the final productive year of his life, a symptomatology of declining vitality and exhaustion is central to his critical approach. The symptomatology becomes extended to entire people and ages with his diagnosis of modernity as decadent: “an age of decay and declining vitality”.¹⁷² Moreover, his portrayal of the importance of an organism’s level of vitality is corroborated by the importance of his use of the concept of life, and its application to describing the varying levels of his own well-being.¹⁷³ The symptomatology is also used as the measure to construct an order of rank of what Nietzsche believes to be archetypal human types. The soul’s ability to generate and then release one’s native vitality beyond the norm in extravagant, spontaneous bursts is the epitome of human

¹⁶⁸ *TI*: Socrates, 2.

¹⁶⁹ *NCW*: Antipodes & *KSA*: 13:17[6] = *WP*: 44.

¹⁷⁰ *BT*: Self-Criticism, 1, *GS*: 370, *KSA*: 12:10[21] = *WLN*, pp. 179-180/*WP*: 1019, 13:12[1] & 13:14[25].

¹⁷¹ *TI*: Skirmishes, 49.

¹⁷² *KSA*: 12:1[236] = *WP*: 58. *Cf.*, *TI*: Skirmishes, 37.

¹⁷³ *EH*: Wise 1 & 2.

greatness.¹⁷⁴ Another example of which is “the overflowing animal vitality of a Rossini”,¹⁷⁵ whom he describes as the kind of composer he cannot live without.¹⁷⁶ The contrast by implication, are the decadents, who cannot afford to dissipate themselves in creative expressions without good reason, and frugally have to husband their resources for mere survival. Hence Nietzsche’s claim that altruism is but “a detour to the preservation of one’s own feeling of vitality and value.”¹⁷⁷

2.6 Conclusion: A Critical Appraisal of Nietzsche’s Method

The aphorism ‘We Antipodes’ that opened the section above discussing Nietzsche’s ‘positive’ use of an abductive method, is a subtle reworking of a version written two years earlier in late 1886, from book five of *The Gay Science*, with the heading of ‘What is Romanticism?’¹⁷⁸ In this earlier version of the aphorism, Nietzsche presents the early 19th century intellectual and artistic movement of Romanticism as a form of decadence in all but name. This is because Nietzsche perceives Romanticism to be reliant on religious ideals expressing a reactive rejection of the world. In his view this negative portrayal of the world has culminated in the prevailing trend for modern pessimism as inspired by Schopenhauer, and replicated by the likes of Edward von Hartmann and Philipp Mainländer.¹⁷⁹ The association of Romanticism with decadence is later explicitly confirmed in a number of notebook entries, including one from late 1887 where Romanticism is listed as a type of decadence,¹⁸⁰ and in another from early 1888 Nietzsche states: “In fact, the Romantics present a morbid form of decadence”.¹⁸¹

The Gay Science version of the aphorism also reiterates a distinction made in a retrospective preface similarly written in late 1886 to his first book, *The Birth of Tragedy*, entitled ‘An Attempt at

¹⁷⁴ *TI*: Skirmishes, 44.

¹⁷⁵ *CW*: 2nd Postscript.

¹⁷⁶ *NCW*: Intermezzo.

¹⁷⁷ *KSA*: 12:9[30] = *WP*: 785.

¹⁷⁸ *GS*: 370.

¹⁷⁹ *GS*: 357.

¹⁸⁰ *KSA*: 13:11[10]. *Cf.*, *KSA*: 13:14[25].

¹⁸¹ Tatsächlich stellen die Romantiker eine krankhafte *décadence*-Form vor . . . , *KSA*: 13:15[97] = *MT*.

Self-Criticism'.¹⁸² Here Nietzsche distinguishes between the prevailing romantic and weak type of pessimism of Schopenhauer, and his own Dionysian pessimism of strength. This distinction from the retrospective preface is then mapped onto another distinction in the aphorism from *The Gay Science*. One between two types of suffering that is then subsequently referred to again in the later version of the aphorism in *Nietzsche contra Wagner*. In *The Gay Science* version, what he calls “romantic pessimism” is associated with those who suffer from an impoverishment of life, again explicitly linked to Schopenhauer and Wagner.¹⁸³ This form of pessimism is again contrasted with the Dionysian pessimism associated with those who suffer from a superabundance of life – like his idol, Goethe – and who want a Dionysian form of art that expresses an affirmation of life.

Stimulated by hindsight, Nietzsche now realises that such problematic romantic pessimism is also discernible in the viewpoint he portrayed in *The Birth of Tragedy*. The fault lay in his early aesthetic conception which interpreted romantic pessimism in terms of a Dionysian pessimism of strength. In the retrospective preface he now openly exposes the complicity of *The Birth of Tragedy* in the romantic pessimism it ostensibly sought to dispel.¹⁸⁴ This unwitting collusion is implied at the beginning of *The Gay Science* version of the aphorism and in the retrospective preface to the first volume of *Human, All Too Human*,¹⁸⁵ but more directly reiterated in the equivalent to the second volume:

I conducted with myself a patient and tedious campaign against the unscientific basic tendency of that romantic pessimism to interpret and inflate individual personal experiences into universal judgements and, indeed, into condemnations of the world . . . in short, it was then that I turned my perspective *around*.¹⁸⁶

All these writings from late 1886 show that he realises that he replicated and aggravated the very problem he originally was attempting to remedy many years prior; namely that the contemporary

¹⁸² Young (2010), p. 485.

¹⁸³ *GS*: 370.

¹⁸⁴ *BT*: Self-Criticism, 6 & 7.

¹⁸⁵ *HH*: I, Preface, 1.

¹⁸⁶ *HH*: II, Preface, 5.

state of cultural malaise that he wished to replace with a rebirth of tragic culture, was actually partly due to his own decadence. He has become aware that back then he was decadent. Yet he does not admit to his condition by using such a term until *The Case of Wagner*,¹⁸⁷ and a more detailed revelation only appears later in *Ecce Homo*.¹⁸⁸

This is where the first problem with Nietzsche's methodology arises: he is evidently in no position to claim a privileged perspective on the status of culture, and his critique potentially has a problem with self-reference. Although Nietzsche portrays himself as a universal physician of culture, one wonders if his description of decadence and any potential prescription to remedy it are really of and for himself. His knowledge and authority on the subject often comes from personal experience. According to his own admission – and according to his own theory – he is a product of his age, which is decadent. And yet he has the advantage that he is not blind to his own decadence: “I am just as much a child of my age as Wagner, which is to say a *decadent*: it is just that I have understood this, I have resisted it.”¹⁸⁹ He declares he has only resisted decadence, and makes no claim to have overcome it, for to say otherwise would be contrary to his own assertions about the futility of ever reversing or even arresting decadence.¹⁹⁰

In order to assess the merit of his approach we must ask if it is possible to separate the overall conception of decadence as advanced by Nietzsche – the *theorist* of decadence – from Nietzsche – the *exemplar* of decadence. In *Ecce Homo* he describes his long battle with the condition such that “I am experienced in questions of decadence . . . I know it inside and out”.¹⁹¹ One must question if Nietzsche's ‘theory’ of decadence can be sensibly used as the basis to probe the varying degrees of disarray of his own soul.¹⁹² The distinct possibility arises that the basis of the theory stands predominantly or possibly solely, on a generalisation pertaining to his personal experience. In

¹⁸⁷ *CW*: Preface.

¹⁸⁸ *EH*: Wise, 1-2.

¹⁸⁹ *CW*: Preface.

¹⁹⁰ *TI*: Skirmishes, 43. See Chapter Nine.

¹⁹¹ *EH*: Wise, 1.

¹⁹² See my cautionary comment on Nietzsche's ‘theory of decadence’ in the Introduction.

a similar fashion, nor can the symptoms of his soul's disorder and resistance be called upon to validate the theory, if it is indeed the case that the diagnosis of his decadence is wholly derived from the theory itself. In order to square this circle, it would be necessary for either impartial scrutiny of Nietzsche's own case history, or an independent validation of the theory itself.

Aside from the potential difficulties of self-reference, a second related but more general problem emerges from his overall approach. As I have argued above, at the heart of Nietzsche's unravelling of decadence is his employment of a number of techniques that use abductive inferences to generate a hypothesis about decadence – negatively in the case of metonymy, and positively with regard to his general method based upon genealogy and symptomatology – all of which are grounded within a framework of extolling his empiricism and naturalism. Some characterize abduction as the generation of a hypothesis and as a mode of inference that is the basis in generating *potentially* the best explanation, as used for instance in medical diagnosis.¹⁹³ The task of the diagnostician is to produce the best explanation for the symptoms which are typically those findings for the case that shows abnormal values. Crucially the diagnostic conclusion should firstly explain those symptoms (it should be plausible and be significantly better than alternative explanations); and secondly, the choice of the signs and symptoms are subjective and so are in need of verification through testing and further explication. This choice depends on the capacity of observation, comparison and classification, and therefore the perspective of the person making the diagnosis. As we have seen, Nietzsche – the self-appointed 'cultural physician' – claims to undertake such an initiative – "*A diagnosis of the modern soul*" – but it is one that probably falls short of these two criteria of validation.¹⁹⁴ For aside from potential issues of self-reference, neither criterion is particularly forthcoming from Nietzsche himself in the case of his hypothesis on decadence. In Nietzsche's defence, it is clear from his note from at the end of the first essay of *The Genealogy* that he believes there is much more work to do on the part of others. He states a requirement for mutual

¹⁹³ See Schleifer & Vannatta (2006), and Lawson & Daniel (2011), pp. 406-410.

¹⁹⁴ CW: Epilogue. Cf., BGE: 208.

suspensions to be cast aside and the instigation of a “cordial and fruitful exchange” on the part of philosophy, physiology and medicine, in order to accomplish the following task: “every table of values . . . needs first and foremost a *physiological* elucidation and interpretation, rather than a psychological one; and all of them await critical study from medical science”.¹⁹⁵

There is a further difficulty. Due to Nietzsche’s conception of physiology, his conception of decadence is not grounded in the perceptible, corporeal body. The latter merely shows, to those who can read it, the underlying conditions of the ‘invisible body’, the soul. The soul, as already indicated, consists of a reigning system of drives and instincts that propagates the intrinsic vitality of the organism, and it is this ‘invisible body’ which directly sustains the disorder of decadence. So in order to offer a diagnosis that adheres to his naturalism and yet is also in some cursory sense, empirically verifiable, Nietzsche has to investigate and construe the condition of the ‘invisible body’ obliquely. This investigation is accomplished by an interpretation of the symptoms involuntarily expressed by the outer, visible body. He tries to describe the soul as “a society constructed out of drives and affects”,¹⁹⁶ but he lacks any direct, empirical proof of these drives and affects in operation, for they remain by definition, invisible to us.¹⁹⁷

While Nietzsche consistently expresses his symptomatology in empirical, naturalistic terms, his persistent appeal to unconscious drives and regulatory instincts by contrast is inherently speculative. His method then is not dissimilar to Leiter’s portrayal as discussed above. As Gregory Moore has shown, Nietzsche’s conception of physiology was deeply influenced by his highly informed interpretation of contemporary theories in nineteenth-century biology.¹⁹⁸ Nietzsche even claims for instance that the native vitality of the ‘invisible body’ can be measured with a dynamometer – a device for measuring force or power. He thereby implies – but in fact offers no

¹⁹⁵ *GM*: I, 17.

¹⁹⁶ *BGE*: 12.

¹⁹⁷ Stern (2015) also takes a sceptical position by arguing that Nietzsche provides varied and inconsistent accounts of the following: what a ‘drive’ is; how much we can know about drives; and the relationship between drives and conscious deliberations about action.

¹⁹⁸ Moore (2002a).

actual evidence – that such measurements might accurately detect the disarray of an ‘invisible body’, and serve to provide some empirical grounding for his hypothesis.¹⁹⁹

However, since the ‘invisible body’ – by definition – defies direct empirical observation, the very existence of the unconscious drives and instincts remains simply hypothetical, only gleaned by an abductive technique and therefore in need of further support for acceptance. Thus, Nietzsche’s appeal is to an ‘invisible body’, and the fact that the only observable traces of the physiological decay lie solely in some mystifyingly encoded symptoms that perhaps he alone – or only some other master ‘psychologist’ like Sigmund Freud – can interpret, must ultimately remain unconvincing.²⁰⁰ And since he offers no actual empirical means of evaluating the merit of his diagnoses, it lacks scientific credence. It would appear that not only is there a lack of potential ‘Results Continuity’ with science; it is also rather questionable if Nietzsche really is emulating a scientific kind of ‘Methods Continuity’. Thus, the analysis of decadence thereby possibly vindicates Janaway’s general analysis of Nietzsche’s naturalism. Arguably, such criticism is based on our contemporary conceptions of the physical sciences, and that ‘science’ for Nietzsche is first and foremost philology, critical thinking that yields methodological insight.²⁰¹ However, if Nietzsche’s hypothesis about decadence is still based on an abductive reasoning as I have argued, then his insight is vulnerable to possible refutation due to a lack of the requisite supporting testing and reasoning.

Nietzsche’s presentation of any supporting evidence for the hypothesis is presented as demonstrably plausible. Yet he does not provide a comparative and sustained evaluation against alternative interpretations, especially for the utility and function of values so as to justify why his explanation is the best available. As we have seen above, this is something he *does* appear to do with his conception of a naturalistic morality and the idea of life as a standard of value, which he defends by criticising the alternative, an ‘anti-morality.’ The closest he seems to come to evaluating an alternative explanation for his emerging hypothesis is by fleetingly suggesting the assimilation of

¹⁹⁹ *TI*: Skirmishes, 20 & *KSA*: 13:15[10] = *WP*: 851. *Cf.*, *KSA*: 13:17[5] = *WP*: 807.

²⁰⁰ *EH*: Wise, 1.

²⁰¹ *A*: 13 & 49.

value judgements to matters of taste.²⁰² However, it appears that Nietzsche simply assumes that his conclusion is the best available explanation of the phenomenon. An implicit challenge then is that *others* try to present a better explanation. Indeed, one could use his distinction of opposing views on life – ‘hatred’ versus ‘superabundance’ – together with the other distinction of their corresponding ideals of ‘heaven’ versus ‘reality’, as an argument against his own interpretation. For example, one could argue that the reason why someone may ascribe to a Christian ideal of heaven and immortality is not because they hate this earthly life. Rather the reason is because they enjoy life so much they choose to believe in the possibility that they can live in some sense, forever. Therefore, there is no compelling reason to accept its plausibility and his implied conclusion that it is the best available explanation, especially since no real comparison with alternatives is offered or explored. When this hypothesis on decadence is placed under any empirical scrutiny, it is conceivable that it will be found wanting, and that it may be succeeded by an alternative and better explanation, for as we saw, Nietzsche encouraged further empirical research. After all, he knows that he is not an empirical scientist. He pursues a philosophical project – or to be more precise – his focus is to develop a new kind of philosophical psychology.

²⁰² “What decides against Christianity now is our taste, not our reasons.”, GS: 132. Cf., A: 13 & 19.

PART II: CAUSES AND EFFECTS

Chapter 3: The Causes of Decadence

3.1 Introduction

Nietzsche does not explicitly specify the causes of decadence anywhere in his oeuvre. I am not aware of any commentator that does so either. This is no surprise. Nietzsche usually refrains from discussing decadence in causal terms, for the kind of reasons discussed in the Chapter 2.3.¹ Given his predilection instead for discussing decadence formulated in terms akin to a medical diagnosis, I will use the sequential causes that are used on a death certificate, in order to discuss, in an analogous fashion, what I see as the progressive causes pertaining to decadence. In the following exposition then I will refer to three distinct types of causes of decadence. First, there is a 'root', *underlying cause* that initiated the train of events leading to the onset of decadence. Secondly, there is an *intermediate cause* which refers to an important contributing condition that leads from the underlying cause to the final, immediate cause. So thirdly, the *immediate cause* refers to the principal factor directly leading to decadence. A simple example of such a sequence regarding a cause of death in reverse order is that a pulmonary embolism – a blockage – is stated as the immediate cause, which was due to the intermediate one of a fractured neck, which was itself incurred by the underlying cause of tripping and falling down the stairs.

A number of commentators do address the question of the causes of decadence more obliquely in the course of describing the overall phenomenon.² As we saw in Chapter 1.3.1 to 1.3.3, it is possible to get a sense of the cause and effects of decadence by deciphering Nietzsche's three formulae as presented in his published writings. Some notebook entries – one of which was briefly examined in Chapter 1.3 – add more clarity by providing examples of the effects of decadence.

¹ However, the exception is that Nietzsche says a fundamental problem with understanding the nature of decadence is a general confusion over cause and effect, where the effects of decadence are mistaken for its causes, as discussed in Chapter 2.4.1.

² Conway (1997), p. 25, states that: "Nietzsche thus locates the ultimate source and necessity of decadence in the illness of 'bad conscience'". Schacht (1983), pp. 274-275, alludes to the same point in a discussion of humanity's corruption and subsequent decline that is equated with decadence. Benson (2008), pp. 56-60, skirts around the subject in a discussion of the reactive logic of decadence in comparison to notions of decline and degeneration. Acharya (2014), Chapter 5, presents a case study of the decadence of noble Hellenic culture.

However, the notebooks add little about its causes, with the exception of a single entry.³ I will use this piece of evidence – which to my knowledge has passed unnoticed by commentators – to argue in the second half this chapter that Nietzsche portrays the debilitating influences of the rise of civil society upon humanity as the underlying cause of decadence. I will begin by building on the discussion in Chapter 1 and show that the disorder of an individual's drives and instincts should be seen as the immediate, physiological cause of decadence. In the second half of the chapter I will present a more integrated exposition of all three causes: the forces of civilization as the underlying cause, bad conscience as the intermediate cause, and the disunity and disorder of drives as immediate cause.

3.2 The Immediate Cause of Decadence: A Physiological Disorder of the Self Due to a Lack of Will to Power

Recall that in Chapter 1.2, decadence for Nietzsche was presented in general terms as a kind of internal disunity – a deficiency of organic unity – that leads to artificially contrived entities that either have an imposed structure or lack one, with a resulting dearth of natural vitality. A key example of this kind of disunity arises from opposing one's natural instincts as portrayed in the first formula for decadence. The second formula showed how the subsequent disintegration of the instincts and the accompanying physical weakness makes people instinctively choose what is harmful to them. Indeed, what Nietzsche perhaps considers to be *the* prime example of disunity as decadence is this kind of life-inhibiting physiological condition.⁴ What obscures this is his tendency to use the same term indiscriminately refer also to the widespread effects of the condition, for example, when he refers to “our whole literary and artistic decadence from St Petersburg to Paris”.⁵ His more pervasive usage then is stating that some entity is a consequence, expression, symptom or sign of this physiological condition. For instance, when Nietzsche construes “dialectics as a symptom

³ KSA: 13:15[67] = WP: 122.

⁴ KSA: 13:17[6] = WP: 44. Cf., KSA: 13:15[10] = WP: 851.

⁵ A: 7.

of decadence”,⁶ he draws the following underlying causal connection. Socrates’ proclivity for dialectal reasoning is indicative of an uncouth tyrant reduced to inflicting humiliation and revenge on his opponents in a desperate act of self-defence. These characteristics arise from the same tyrannical use of reason, by which Socrates subjugates the chaos and anarchy of his own instincts.⁷

The first half of this chapter then sets out to demonstrate that the immediate cause of decadence is a *physiological disorder*. Decadence is a paradigm of Nietzsche’s applied conception of physiology, as typified by six of its principal expressions: ressentiment, the ascetic ideal, pessimism, nihilism, Christianity and Buddhism. For example, we are told that it is easy to discern “the actual physiological causation of *ressentiment*”,⁸ Nietzsche’s term for a reactive feeling of a moralised resentment and revenge.⁹ The self-denial and suppression of natural instincts that constitutes the ascetic ideal “indicates a partial physiological inhibition”,¹⁰ and is in Nietzsche’s eyes “the *detrimental* ideal *par excellence*, a will to the end, a decadence ideal”.¹¹ For Nietzsche, pessimism is a consequence of decadence,¹² where the assertion of the modern variety of pessimism is that to live is to suffer, so non-existence is preferable to existence, shows “[p]essimism as a preliminary form of nihilism.”¹³ This is because the original sense of nihilism for Nietzsche is that existence has no intrinsic meaning or value, and hence “nihilism is not a cause, but just the logic of decadence”.¹⁴ Pessimism and nihilism are both “merely the expression of physiological decadence”.¹⁵ Christianity, like Buddhism, “are religions of decadence”,¹⁶ so Nietzsche speaks of “the physiological depravity of

⁶ EH: Wise, 1.

⁷ TI: Socrates, 4-9. Cf., KSA: 13:14[92] = WP: 433 & 13:24[1].

⁸ GM: III, 15.

⁹ KSA: 13:15[32].

¹⁰ GM: III, 13.

¹¹ EH: GM.

¹² KSA: 13:14[73] = WP: 42.

¹³ KSA: 12:10[58] = WP: 9.

¹⁴ KSA: 13:14[86] = WLN, pp. 248-249/WP: 43.

¹⁵ KSA: 13:17[8] = WP: 38. Translated as “The nihilistic movement is merely the expression of physiological decadence”, since the previous sentence states “that pessimism is not a problem but a symptom, that the name should be replaced by ‘nihilism,’”. However, in the original, the first sentence clearly begins with “The pessimistic movement”, (Die pessimistische Bewegung ist nur der Ausdruck einer physiologischen décadence).

¹⁶ A: 20.

the typical Christian”¹⁷ and of “Christianity as a symptom of physiological decadence”,¹⁸ whilst Buddha’s teachings are really “the voice of physiology”.¹⁹

My analysis of this physiological disorder as the immediate cause of decadence will draw on Nietzsche’s hypothesis of will to power. Recall that in Chapter 1.2 I briefly mentioned that one way to understand the will to power hypothesis is that human beings have a drive to express their strengths and thereby pleurably feel their power.²⁰ This initial definition will need expanding, which is challenging since Nietzsche’s conception of will to power varies in both his published works and notebooks. Therefore, I will utilise Julian Young’s observation that will to power starts as a principle of universal explanation, before it becomes a more specific principle of demarcation in *The Anti-Christ* to evaluate two opposing expressions of life.²¹ It is here where I shall begin.

3.2.1 Will To Power as Demarcation

In an unpleasant passage from *The Anti-Christ*, Nietzsche identifies decadence as the cause of certain mental and physical afflictions, and diagnoses these afflictions without relying on any established principles of medical science. He states that the *consequences* of physiological decline are *expressed* in psychological conditions:

The priest’s total lack of psychological cleanliness – his eyes give it away – is a *consequence* of decadence, – if you observe hysterical females or children with rickets, you will see how regularly an instinctive falseness, a pleasure in lying for the sake of lying, and an inability to look or walk straight are expressions of decadence.²²

For Nietzsche, beliefs, desires and values constitute an individual’s psychology,²³ and in the priest’s case his psychology is tainted by an instinctive and harmful self-deception,²⁴ which is a product of his

¹⁷ A: 47.

¹⁸ Das Christenthum als Symptom physiologischer décadence, KSA: 13:14[13] = MT.

¹⁹ EH: Wise, 6.

²⁰ BGE: 13.

²¹ Young (2010), p. 548.

²² A: 52.

²³ A: 61.

²⁴ EH: Destiny, 7.

physiology of disintegrating instincts.²⁵ An earlier passage makes the claim that the needs and ideals of humanity are now expressed in values of decadence, which is a reflection of “the *corruption* of humanity” in general. More specifically, this corruption is one of the body and its underlying drives and instincts within the individual:

I understand corruption . . . in the sense of decadence: my claim is that all the values in which humanity has collected its highest desiderata are *values of decadence*. I call an animal, a species, an individual corrupt when it loses its instincts, when it chooses, when it *prefers* things that will harm it. A history of the 'higher feelings', the 'ideals of humanity' . . . would amount to an explanation of *why* human beings are so corrupt.²⁶

Other entries from published texts together with those from his notebooks tell us that this ‘physiologically’ instinctual corruption manifests itself in physical weakness and exhaustion. A debased physiology is the source of degraded unconscious responses²⁷ and forms of ‘psychological corruption’,²⁸ including the reasoning of the most spirited of people.²⁹ This combination exhibits itself as an overall weak mentality that is akin to a milder form of mental illness³⁰ that reflects a greater corrupted self, personality or soul.³¹ The consequences of the physiological process of corruption and its accompanying psychological weakness then are expressions of decadence. The result is the creation of and adherence to evaluations which are contrary to the flourishing of life³² that Nietzsche predicts will eventually corrupt the whole of humanity.³³

In a number of other passages at the beginning of *The Anti-Christ*, Nietzsche provides us with a governing principle for how and why this corruption of the self takes place. This is his hypothesis of will to power. In the present context it is helpful to understand will to power along the lines

²⁵ *TJ*: Skirmishes, 35.

²⁶ *A*: 6.

²⁷ *KSA*: 13:15[13] = *WP*: 54 & 13:15[41] = *WP*: 52.

²⁸ *A*: 44. *Cf.*, *KSA*: 13:14[108] = *WP*: 271.

²⁹ *A*: 5.

³⁰ *KSA*: 13:14[65] = *WP*: 47.

³¹ *A*: 58.

³² *TJ*: Morality, 5.

³³ *EH*: Destiny, 7.

proposed by Bernard Reginster. In his reading, Nietzsche's notion of will to power is best understood as essentially the activity of continuously striving to overcome resistance in the pursuit of one's ends.³⁴ The basis for this interpretation is clearly presented in the following passage, where Nietzsche says that what may be termed 'good' is a feeling of an increase in power due to confronting and overcoming some resistance. This implies the sense of accomplishment leads to happiness, and unhappiness or displeasure is stated elsewhere, as the inability to resist or master, and be non-self-assertive.³⁵

What is good? – Everything that enhances people's feeling of power, will to power, power itself. What is bad? – Everything stemming from weakness. What is happiness? – The feeling that power is *growing*, that some resistance has been overcome. *Not* contentedness, but more power; *not* peace, but war; *not* virtue, but prowess . . .³⁶

Power is never intended by Nietzsche to simply mean to dominate others through fear, conceit or physical force, but rather to convey an abstract sense for a striving for potency, for adeptness and growth that is synonymous with effective agency, vitality and life. Power thus understood, is a standard of value for Nietzsche. Will to power as presented in *The Anti-Christ* only provides an oblique explanation for the corruption mentioned above. Rather its role is more a ready means of *evaluating* if corruption has occurred, for it acts as a principle of *demarcation* between a healthy, ascending, flourishing life and a decadent, declining one.

Will to power is not a claim about *what* we will, but rather *how* we will. As John Richardson once argued, "'will to power' is a potency for something, a directedness toward some end".³⁷ In other words, will to power is a higher-order end rather than a first-order end. In order for an agent to will power, one must have a first-order goal such as completing a race – will to power merely modifies the way that goal is achieved – such as aspiring to win the race in order to secure the title

³⁴ Reginster, (2006), p. 127.

³⁵ KSA: 13:14[80] = *WLN*, p. 247/*WP*: 693.

³⁶ A: 2.

³⁷ Richardson (1996), p. 21.

of world champion perhaps. Two more entries from *The Anti-Christ* capture this point and give a clear indication that the decline of a healthy life is caused by a lack of this will to power:

I consider life itself to be an instinct for growth, for endurance, for the accumulation of force, for *power*: when there is no will to power, there is decline. My claim is that *none* of humanity's highest values have had this will, – that *nihilistic* values, values of decline, have taken control under the aegis of the holiest names.³⁸

This passage clarifies two important points. First, it would *not* be correct to interpret it as evidence of Nietzsche portraying will to power as a strictly biological hypothesis. This is because the term 'life' is not being used here only in a biological sense – for instance, a human being cannot be alive and not possess will to power. Will to power is instead intended to provide an account for the diversity of human behaviour and thought, and Nietzsche projects an element of psychological interpretation onto nature (psychology for Nietzsche is also clearly grounded in physiology and biology).³⁹ Rather than taking 'life' here to convey existence *per se*, what Nietzsche refers to are modes of life that fail to value or express life as a force, or do so only in a diminished form. These modes can be part of a life yet would be considered harmful towards life, or even 'lifeless', such as the self-suppressing ascetic ideal, or the kind of negative feelings in *ressentiment*.⁴⁰ This is in contrast to ideals that help overcome adversity and are 'life-affirming', such as those of the Paralympics or Invictus Games for instance. Secondly, for Nietzsche, none of our highest values that are enshrined in divine authority and secular versions thereof have ever possessed this property of the will to power, or have never arisen as its result. If my interpretation based on Reginster's view is correct, this is because neither the old religious nor new secular beliefs contain values that strive to overcome resistance in the requisite sense. Nietzsche's aim is to promote values that do this in order to reverse the on-going

³⁸ A: 6.

³⁹ Interestingly Emden (2016) – who upholds a strong version of this view – does not quote A: 6 whilst arguing that the biological basis of will to power and Nietzsche's naturalism in general, should not be overlooked in preference for one of psychology: "Nietzsche's naturalism is not primarily oriented toward the cognitive psychology of our moral and epistemological commitments, but it is rooted in contemporary biological discussions. Biology comes first, psychology second . . . Drives, in other words, are not simply expressions of our volitional existence, but they always already possess a physiological and, thus, biological facticity.", pp. 31-32.

⁴⁰ KSA: 12:10[9] = WLN, p. 175/WP: 350.

decline of humanity. In the following passage Nietzsche explicitly associates physiological decline with decadence:

Whenever the will to power falls off in any way, there will also be physiological decline, decadence. And when the most masculine virtues and drives have been chopped off the god of decadence, he will necessarily turn into a god of the physiologically retrograde, the weak.⁴¹

The use of the word ‘also’ (*auch*) in the passage implies a connection between two forms of decline. The correlation is one between an unspecified type – which I interpret to be psychological – and an explicitly physiological form of decline. The point that a decline in will to power causes decadence is more generally reiterated in a notebook entry from mid-1888: “Where this will, the will to power, declines, there is decadence every time.”⁴²

The conception of will to power emerging from these passages then can be construed in a practical sense. First, it manifests itself throughout human history to varying degrees, and secondly, it is the drive and energy for and the experience of a form of effective agency to achieve something. Will to power, Nietzsche assumes, is the capacity to govern oneself, together with a proficiency in realising one’s goals, and the ability to thrive in overcoming opposition and resistance in pursuing these goals. By 1888, as Nietzsche documents his explicit interest in decadence, he presents will to power as an account of human motivation that has two aspects: first, a surplus of power explains *why* any goal is pursued, and secondly, will to power determines *how* a goal is to be pursued. Will to power thereby motivates the kinds of choices that organise a self into a disciplined whole that is able to pursue life successfully.⁴³ In contrast, a lack of power results in weakness and instinctively choosing what is harmful – for example due to ‘disinterested’ motives – as we saw in Chapter 1.3.2.⁴⁴

⁴¹ A: 17.

⁴² Wo dieser Wille, der Wille zur Macht, niedergeht, giebt es jedes Mal *décadence*. KSA: 13:17[4] = MT.

⁴³ TI: Epigrams, 12.

⁴⁴ TI: Skirmishes, 35.

If will to power is the governing principle for an ascending life and is indicative of a positive orientation that reflects a strong underlying physiological constitution, then decadence denotes a declining life and is indicative of the obverse trait of mental feebleness arising out of physical weakness. A late notebook entry conveys this general idea: “The will to power, as the will to live – the ascending life. The big errors are a consequence of decadence.”⁴⁵ A will to power based interpretation of decadence gains credence because Nietzsche mentions in another notebook entry that as a governing principle, will to power should not be confused with its opposite *laisser aller*, or literally ‘letting go’.⁴⁶

Nietzsche employs the term ‘*laisser aller*’ to argue that the general concept of freedom as a form of release from something is false and that freedom only really arises through the right kind of restraint and resistance to impulse.⁴⁷ Nietzsche tells us in *Twilight of the Idols* that “our modern concept of ‘freedom’” with its “demands for independence, free development, and *laisser aller* . . . [is] a symptom of *decadence* . . . one more proof of the degeneration of the instincts.”⁴⁸ In this context, Nietzsche’s use of the term ‘*laisser aller*’ implies the presence of an extreme form of instinctual disarray within an individual, when different drives aimlessly compete for dominance. The instincts are in a state of anarchy – as discussed in Chapter 1.4.1 with the example of Socrates – which is sufficient factor for someone to either cease to be a unified self or fail to become one, for there is no organizing idea present to guide the self-development.⁴⁹ *Laisser aller* is expressed as a *lack* of motivation, direction, restraint and self-control to a point when ‘anything goes’. This is perhaps better conveyed in the more contemptuous judgements like ‘he has let himself go’ and so ceases to be himself, or ‘he needs to pull himself together’ and become who he is. Here, ‘freedom’ is the symptom, and decadence – the instinctual disarray – is the cause. Once decadent values get established in a culture, individuals then lack the necessary guidance that a culture composed of life-

⁴⁵ Der Wille zur Macht, als Wille zum Leben — des aufsteigenden Lebens. Die grossen Irrthümer als Folge der *décadence*. KSA: 13:16[86] = MT.

⁴⁶ KSA: 13:15[67] = WP: 122.

⁴⁷ BGE: 188, TI: Skirmishes 41, & KSA: 13:15[67] = WP: 122. In his early notebooks, the term ‘*laisser aller*’ is used to refer to an historical detachment from the pursuit of scientific knowledge, KSA: 7:19[28] = WEN, pp. 100-101, 7:19[292] & 7:29[22].

⁴⁸ TI: Skirmishes, 41.

⁴⁹ TI: Socrates, 4 & 9.

affirming values provides. Nietzsche claims the features of a strong physiological constitution and positive mentality were encapsulated in the life-affirming values of previous 'master moralities', yet their features are lacking in the decadent values of a life negating Christian 'slave morality'.⁵⁰

In this section, I have argued that Nietzsche's portrayal of will to power in *The Anti-Christ* functions as a principle of demarcation between the healthy life and decadent life. In the next section I wish to show that Nietzsche's earlier presentations of will to power functions instead as a means of explanation for human behaviour.

3.2.2 Will To Power as Explanation

In Nietzsche's writings prior to *The Anti-Christ*, lack of will to power is already presented as the cause of decadence. However, rather than being a principle of demarcation as discussed above, the doctrine is essentially cast as a psychological hypothesis that best explains most, if not all human action and behaviour,⁵¹ as Walter Kaufmann, Maudemarie Clark, and Brian Leiter contend for example.⁵² They portray will to power as a study of the forms and patterns of its development that is essentially synonymous with Nietzsche's amalgamated notion of a 'physio-psychology'.⁵³

As described in the previous chapter, one characteristic that both the usually distinct disciplines of physiology and psychology have in common is that Nietzsche employs drives or instincts and their affects as explanatory categories when describing our fundamental nature in general, and our bodily and cognitive functions in particular. He states in one notebook entry that "[o]ur drives can be reduced to *the will to power*",⁵⁴ and mentions in another the "reduction of all basic organic functions to the will to power".⁵⁵ In *Beyond Good and Evil* he declares that all forms of causality can be reduced to will to power – at least that pertaining to the organic domain – which

⁵⁰ CW: Epilogue.

⁵¹ KSA: 13:14[121] = *WLN*, pp. 256-257/*WP*: 688.

⁵² Kaufmann (1974), pp. 178-297, Clark (1990), pp. 209-212, and Leiter (2015), pp. 112-116 & p. 201.

⁵³ "Above all, a living thing wants to *discharge* its strength – life itself is will to power –", *BGE*: 13. "To grasp psychology as morphology and the *doctrine of the development of the will to power*, which is what I have done", *BGE*: 23.

⁵⁴ KSA: 11:40[61] = *WLN*, pp. 46-47.

⁵⁵ KSA: 12:1[30] = *WLN*, pp. 56-57.

includes the physiology and the psychology of the human being.⁵⁶ A persuasive interpretation then is that physiological and psychological causality are to be explained in terms of will to power, and the entities that support this reduction are drives, instincts and their affects. Drives and instincts are instances of will to power,⁵⁷ and those drives and instincts tainted by decadence manifest themselves as a decline of will to power as Nietzsche states twice in his notebooks.⁵⁸

The process by which a decline of will to power causes physiological and psychological decline can be usefully depicted using a model of organizational struggle proposed by Wolfgang Müller-Lauter.⁵⁹ For him, physiological processes are releases of energy that are power struggles of will-quanta that then organize themselves into relatively independent units.⁶⁰ A unity of will to power – such as an individual – exists in Müller-Lauter’s model as an irreducible multiplicity of struggling forces. This unity is only strong or healthy if it consists of an internal struggle comprising many competing wills to power, yet succeeds in maintaining control and organisation by stopping the struggle descending into chaos and resultant sickness. For instance, Müller-Lauter cites the example of William Shakespeare as someone praised by Nietzsche precisely because he has a variety of powerful and conflicting drives. These are blended into a powerful unity, resulting in a flourishing individual with the yearning and aptitude to depict his diverse perspectives and observations regarding humanity with great clarity.⁶¹ This is in contrast to the weakest or most decadent individual, who is unable to organize the multiplicity of struggling wills to power within itself. Such an individual lacks a master drive,⁶² and hence has no ‘passion’ or organising idea. The result is a vacillating and moribund person.

Decadence for Müller-Lauter is just a particular mode of one of these physiological releases of energy, yet one where there is incapacity for organic unity due to a physiological deficiency of organizing force. This manifests itself as a process whereby former parts become independent from

⁵⁶ *BGE*: 36. See Loeb (2015).

⁵⁷ *KSA*: 11:36[31] = *WLN*, pp. 26-27/*WP*: 619.

⁵⁸ *KSA*: 13:14[135] = *WP*: 461 & 13:14[137] = *WP*: 401.

⁵⁹ Müller-Lauter (1999), Chapters 3 & 8.

⁶⁰ Müller-Lauter (1999), p. 42.

⁶¹ Müller-Lauter (1999), p. 79. See *KSA*: 11:27[59] = *WP*: 966. *Cf.*, *KSA*: 12:9[166] = *WP*: 848 & *EH*: *Clever*, 4.

⁶² *BGE*: 158.

the whole. As the predominant will that previously organised the unity degrades in power, the subordinate forces strive for independence and assertiveness. The resulting turmoil produces a 'disgregation', by which Nietzsche means a separation of components or 'atoms' from a cohesive whole resulting in disunity or anarchy.⁶³ The term 'disgregation'⁶⁴ is applied by Nietzsche to a number of entities including the will,⁶⁵ impulses *i.e.* drives⁶⁶ and instincts,⁶⁷ and also informatively to a power-centre,⁶⁸ and personality.⁶⁹ Nietzsche associates declining life with "the loss of all the forces of organization, which is to say separation, division, subordination, and domination".⁷⁰ According to Müller-Lauter, what Nietzsche means by decadence then is a process of organisational failure due to the decay in the power to maintain complex unities. The functional implication of this model is similar to a point made by John Richardson⁷¹ and discussed by Bernard Reginster.⁷² Richardson claims that unity is only obtained when one drive masters (rather than tyrannizes or dominates) other drives by acting not as a force that sets itself above others, but rather attains a position of ascendancy through rivalry between equal forces. In a similar fashion, for Müller-Lauter, a will to power organization that is degenerating still has sufficient cohesion to strive for disintegration:

The wills to power, previously held together in a unity, now strive to separate. Nietzsche describes this centripetal tendency as the "disintegration [*Disgregation*] of the instincts". . . .
Decadence, described as "*Disgregation*," is not a state but a process But once this actually is completed, once a unity has disintegrated into a plurality without cohesion (which cohesion is possible only as a hierarchical structure), then we can no longer speak of decadence. This

⁶³ CW: 7.

⁶⁴ 'Disgregation' is spelt the same way in German, and is often simply translated as 'disintegration'.

⁶⁵ *TI*, Errors, 2. *Cf.*, CW: 7, KSA: 13:14[83] = WP: 444, 13:14[133] = WP: 684 & 13:17[6].

⁶⁶ KSA: 13:14[219] = *WLN*, p. 266/WP: 46.

⁶⁷ *TI*: Skirmishes, 35.

⁶⁸ KSA: 11:43[2].

⁶⁹ KSA: 13:15[106].

⁷⁰ *TI*: Skirmishes, 37.

⁷¹ Richardson (1996).

⁷² "The chief characteristic of mastery (in contrast to another form of domination that Nietzsche calls 'tyranny') is that the mastering drive does not deprive the mastered drives of their own ends and activities, but rather integrates them into the pursuit of its end.", Reginster (2006), p. 130.

term can designate only the phases of the disintegration process of a whole, insofar as unity still remains despite all dissolution tendencies.⁷³

Nietzsche characterises the reduction of volitional resources, the resultant loss of energy and reduction of actual power and feeling of power as weakness of the will (*Schwäche des Willens*).⁷⁴ He portrays it as one consequence of decadence⁷⁵ or physiological degeneration.⁷⁶ I will next examine this conception of weakness of the will, together with the associated and more general notion of exhaustion (*Erschöpfung*). Both notions are nominally defined as effects of decadence. However, since they play an important role in instigating the cyclical nature of decadence, they are best discussed here.⁷⁷

3.2.3 Weakness of the Will and Exhaustion

The common understanding of weakness of will is twofold: first, a lack of practical knowledge, and second, a lack of accomplishment.⁷⁸ An individual either struggles to formulate what he thinks is in his best interest, or – even if this is arrived at – he is unable to execute whatever is required to see it through, and may end up doing something else instead. This is in contrast to a strong-willed person who knows what he wants, formulates a plan to achieve it, and sees that plan through regardless. Nietzsche admits at one point that he regards weakness of the will as a metaphor he finds misleading.⁷⁹ This is because for him there simply is “no will” (*keinen Willen*).⁸⁰ ‘Will’ does not exist as any sort of entity as, for example, Schopenhauer would hold. It is an abstraction based on the power experienced in willing. What is referred to commonly as a ‘strong will’ is for Nietzsche really a

⁷³ Müller-Lauter (1999), p. 43.

⁷⁴ Dries (2015), shows the importance of a first-personal “feeling of freedom” or power in Nietzsche’s model. He perhaps does not take sufficient account of the fact that, for Nietzsche, feelings of power and actual power can come apart, e.g. in the ascetic.

⁷⁵ KSA: 13:14[73] = WP: 42 & 13:14[86] = WP: 43.

⁷⁶ TI: Morality, 2 & KSA: 13:14[113] = WP: 334. Cf., 13:14[219] = WLN, p. 266/WP: 46.

⁷⁷ See Chapter 9.2.

⁷⁸ Due to space considerations, I will not engage in the contemporary philosophical debate on weakness of will.

⁷⁹ KSA: 13:14[219] = WLN, p. 266/WP: 46.

⁸⁰ KSA: 9:3[91], 9:11[102], 10:9[10], 10:13[1], 10:24[32] = WP: 671 & 767, 10:24[34] = WP: 671, 11:26[254], 11:27[1], 12:5[9] = WLN, p. 106, 12:9[98] = WLN, pp. 158-159/WP: 488, 13:11[73] = WLN, pp. 212-213/WP: 715 & 13:14[219] = WLN, p. 266/WP: 46.

condition where one drive organises the multiplicity of others. Conversely, a 'weak will' is the product of disgregation of the drives.⁸¹

For Nietzsche, the composition of the individual self is defined by the structure of the individual's values, which are themselves largely a product of a relation of drives ideally shaped by the emergence of a unifying passion or an organising idea for one's conduct. Therefore, it would appear to follow that what Nietzsche means by 'a weakness of will' is that there is either an inherent weakness in one's nature, or a wish to be so which he regards as an expression of self-denial or 'unselfing' (*Entselbstung*).⁸² As we have seen, someone with no passion or organizing idea – one might say 'without aim or purpose in life' – lacks the energy to define one due to an underlying deficiency in the organisation of their drives and instincts.⁸³ This lack of energy also means that a weakness of the will entails "the inability *not* to react to a stimulus".⁸⁴ By this Nietzsche means an individual is unable to resist external provocations and influences, and is only capable of acting and thinking as a reaction to them, which as we shall see in the following chapter, is indicative of their lack of freedom.⁸⁵ Weakness of the will is therefore sometimes equated in Nietzsche's writings with exhaustion, as it constitutes a reduction in available power or energy,⁸⁶ and in a notebook entry even mentions a "[t]heory of exhaustion".⁸⁷

However, Nietzsche speaks of another kind of exhaustion which affects people. This is because their drives and instincts have been acculturated by the past and prevailing virtues, the product of an 'inherited' exhaustion⁸⁸ as opposed to one that has been 'acquired'.⁸⁹ The former has been derived from an external source and incorporated, and is distinct from the latter which has been developed independently and internally. Again, Nietzsche connects valuing with the attainment of

⁸¹ KSA: 13:14[219] = *WLN*, p. 266/*WP*: 46.

⁸² KSA: 13:11[48].

⁸³ KSA: 13:14[94] = *WP*: 435.

⁸⁴ *TI*: *Morality*, 2.

⁸⁵ KSA: 13:14[86] = *WLN*, pp. 248-249/*WP*: 43 & 13:14[113] = *WP*: 334.

⁸⁶ KSA: 12:9[169] = *WP*: 84.

⁸⁷ KSA: 13:16[53] = *WP*: 50.

⁸⁸ *Cf.*, *TI*: *Errors*, 2, "hereditary exhaustion".

⁸⁹ KSA: 13:15[80] = *WP*: 49.

power: “Values and their changes are related to increases in the power of those positing the values.”⁹⁰ For him physiologies that are well constituted generate energy and the ability to project power. Hence strong physiologies bestow value on things in a very different way to those physiologies that are exhausted, whether through irresponsible living, or inheritance and circumstance. For example, the striving, successful business woman may value an occasional drink at the end of a particular successful working day as a reward and a means of celebration. By contrast, the down trodden operative values drinking as an essential means of coping with the daily drudgery of his work.

Nietzsche makes a clear causal connection then between both types of exhaustion and values. Either can change the value of things.⁹¹ The difference between the two types can be illustrated again using the analogy of alcohol abuse. An individual drained by work commitments and mounting stress levels may ‘acquire’ or develop a need for alcohol that turns into a habit. This kind of habitual necessity is distinct from those who slide into dependency through the custom of social drinking, behaviour ‘inherited’ via the prevailing social acceptance and tolerance of a modern society’s drinking culture. However, this kind of addiction is *not* the cause of physiological dissolution that Nietzsche refers to, in fact the very opposite is the case for it is symptomatic of it. Requirements for strong stimulants to cope with or blot out life are a consequence of a congenital exhaustion brought about by “the tastes and virtues of the times”.⁹² They are the end result of the process of socialisation and civilization, to which I will now turn.⁹³

3.3 The Underlying and Intermediate Causes of Decadence: Civilization and Bad Conscience

Building upon the exposition that the immediate cause of decadence is a physiological disorder due to a lack of will to power, in the second half of this chapter I shall argue that this condition is part of

⁹⁰ KSA: 12:9[39] = WLN, p. 148/WP: 14.

⁹¹ KSA: 13:14[68] = WP: 48.

⁹² BGE: 212.

⁹³ TI: Errors, 2.

a dynamic set of factors that also includes an underlying cause of the role civilization, together with subsequent intermediate cause of the inception of a bad conscience.

3.3.1 The Role of Civilization

I will first turn to discussing the external factor of civilization as an underlying cause of decadence. Possibly the only *explicit* reference to this is made in the following notebook entry from the spring of 1888:

What I warn against: the instincts of decadence should not be confused with *humaneness*; the means of civilization, which lead to disintegration and necessarily to decadence, should not be confused with culture . . .⁹⁴

To my knowledge, no other commentator on Nietzsche's conception of decadence has drawn attention to this passage which I will now analyse in more detail.⁹⁵

The opening sentence states we should not confuse the 'instincts of decadence' (*die Décadence-Instinkte*) with 'humaneness' (*der Humanität*). Nietzsche is highlighting an important distinction between two manifestations of instincts: those 'of decadence' – which using the same term in *The Anti-Christ* are described as "all the cowardices and exhaustions of the soul!"⁹⁶ – are contrasted with those of *Humanität*. The intended meaning then is to state that impact of civilization – the meaning of which is presently unclarified – has weakened the instincts pertaining to a genuine type of humanity. They are actually instincts of decadence.

The passage then continues by stating that civilization (*Civilisation*) – as opposed to culture (*Cultur*) – somehow leads to an unidentified form of disintegration. Let us deal with this last theme first and clarify what kind of disintegration is meant here, and then return to the former distinction afterwards. In another notebook entry that starts with "The question of *decadence*", Nietzsche lists

⁹⁴ **Wovon ich warne:** die *décadence-Instinkte* nicht mit der *Humanität* zu verwechseln: die *auflösenden* und *nothwendig zur decadence treibenden Mittel* der *Civilisation* nicht mit der *Cultur* zu verwechseln. . . , KSA: 13:15[67] = WP: 122.

⁹⁵ Schacht (1983), pp. 331-332 & pp. 389-390, discusses the relationship between domestication, civilization and culture but he does not connect them explicitly to bad conscience, nor to decadence at all. Conway (1997), does both: pp. 25-26 & pp. 31-32, but does not dwell on the relationship, nor describe the friction between civilization and culture that I discuss below. Benson (2008), pp. 58-59, mentions civilization in passing, stating that "Nietzsche follows Bourget's analysis of decadence as a kind of over-civilization", but he does not discuss the role of a bad conscience.

⁹⁶ A: 19.

assorted phenomena exhibiting common characteristics of decadence, and here he uses the same term to refer to “the *disintegrating* instincts” (*die auflösenden Instinkte*).⁹⁷ He also uses essentially the same expression in *The Gay Science* to refer to “the dissolving drive” (*der auflösende Trieb*) as functioning like a poison.⁹⁸ Given the prior mention of instincts, it seems fair to assume that the sort of disintegration he is referring to here is a debasement of the configuration of the human animal’s natural bodily drives and instincts that leads to exhaustion. The cause of which is whatever Nietzsche means by civilization as opposed to culture, which is the next point to clarify.

For Nietzsche, the terms civilization and culture are two conceptions that modern interpretations mistakenly take as roughly synonymous – which may help to explain why he sees that a confusion arises: “the *meaning of all culture* [is] to breed a tame and civilized animal, a *household pet*, out of the beast of prey ‘man’”.⁹⁹ Rather we find across his oeuvre that culture is defined as a process of cultivation and education¹⁰⁰ – particularly of genius and greatness¹⁰¹ – which is distinct from civilization, as defined in a number of passages as a process of taming (*Zähmung*) and breeding (*Züchtung*) that is akin to domestication.¹⁰² One published extract in particular tells us that civilization weakened and tamed the individual’s natural tendencies for self-preservation and self-expression due to an internal physiological struggle:

[E]verywhere where the civilization and taming of man took place, reveals a major fact, the *sickliness* of the type of man who has lived up till now, at least of the tamed man, the physiological struggle of man with death (to be more exact: with disgust at life, with exhaustion and with the wish for the ‘end’).¹⁰³

This passage then assists in establishing a connection between two causes of decadence. The first is an external and pre-requisite cause pertaining to civilization, which Nietzsche portrays as a process of taming that has encroached upon humanity’s natural constitution. The root cause of civilization

⁹⁷ KSA: 13:15[32] = MT.

⁹⁸ GS: 113.

⁹⁹ GM: I, 11.

¹⁰⁰ RB: 10, HH: I, 632 & BGE: 200, 201, 203, 207 & 239.

¹⁰¹ SE: 3, 5 & 6.

¹⁰² GM: II, 11 & III, 13, A: 22, KSA: 12:9[142] & 13:11[153] = WP: 871.

¹⁰³ GM: III, 13.

ultimately leads to another, internal and principal cause, one of a physiological struggle between the individual's instincts that eventually disintegrate, and makes him sick, exhausted and loathing life, as discussed in detail in the first half of this chapter. Moreover, we are told in the opening quote that civilization causes – or more literally is – the 'driving means' (*treibenden Mittel*) for the disintegration (of the instincts), and the latter is necessary (*nothwendig*) for decadence. Once an individual's instincts begin to disintegrate, a process of decadence then is inevitable for the individual and the rest of humanity. This last point is reiterated and generalised in another notebook entry which states "[t]hat civilization entails the physiological decline of a race",¹⁰⁴ and explains why a number of further entries refer to "The problem of 'civilization'".¹⁰⁵

To clarify how and why civilization – as opposed to culture – leads to instinctual disintegration, it is helpful to examine Nietzsche's view of the relationship between the two in more depth. Nietzsche construes civilization in terms of a moral and rational improvement of the human being, but one at the expense of the suppression and forgetting of their human animal tendencies, along with a propensity for forgetfulness.¹⁰⁶ The forging of the resultant humanity is perceived as a kind of cure that not only doesn't ultimately improve the human being, it is really just a cruel process of turning the human animal against itself.¹⁰⁷ This is the reason why Nietzsche perceives humanity to be not on an ascending trajectory, but rather on a descending one.

By contrast, culture can be distinguished from civilization by its memory and affirmation of animality, and the manner in which it seeks to uphold the human being's continuity with the animal kingdom.¹⁰⁸ For the task of culture is primarily an expository one that functions to show that moralisation and rationalisation are techniques directed against the animalistic element of the human being. In Nietzsche's view then, a good culture would be one that liberates people from the prejudices of civilization which are not the 'improvements' that authorities like the priesthood make

¹⁰⁴ Daß die Civilisation den physiologischen Niedergang einer Rasse nach sich zieht. KSA: 13:15[40] = MT.

¹⁰⁵ [das] Problem der „Civilisation“ . . . , KSA: 13:12[1] = MT & 13:9[121], 13:9[185] & 13:10[58].

¹⁰⁶ D: 312.

¹⁰⁷ BGE: 229.

¹⁰⁸ D: 312.

them out to be, but rather techniques of dominance that ultimately weakens people's animality and strengthens only the community.¹⁰⁹ Culture aids in the struggle for a pluralisation of forms of life, by revealing the encroachments of civilization as harmful due to its goal to impose one universal form on life. Culture should function to guide the human animal beyond a moral and rational conception of what constitutes its development and progression, towards an affirmation of life that is unsullied by these notions, and is an expression of fullness and creativity. Culture will thereby produce forms of life that are not forms of power over life, but rather ones that are empowered and are what Nietzsche calls 'overflowing' with 'health' and 'life'. His paradigm is that of pre-Socratic Greece,¹¹⁰ which he claims achieved such an empowerment via the harnessing of the motivational properties of will to power in their cultural institutions.¹¹¹

The difference between culture and civilization not only concerns their opposing aims but also their alternating highpoints, for Nietzsche seems to claim that one must predominate over the other.¹¹² He regards civilization as inherently a moral evaluation that should be superseded by a culture of naturalistic values – a “[n]aturalization of morality”.¹¹³ Civilization is a projection of forced will that at its zenith is epitomised by Christian morality. It manifests itself in potency that is hostile to the animalistic element of the human being, and intolerant toward those of an intrepid and free-spirited nature, since it suppresses their instinct for freedom – in other words, their will to power or ‘freedom of will’.¹¹⁴ Civilization further identifies its adversary in the animalistic element as well as in an independent and spirited nature, disclosing the close bond Nietzsche perceives between the freedom of both the animal and the spirit for growth and power. Culture by contrast, is comparatively free from moralisation, devoid of the forcible attempts to tame the animalistic

¹⁰⁹ *TI*: Improvers, 2.

¹¹⁰ *BT*: Self-Criticism, 1 & *TI*: Ancients, 5.

¹¹¹ *TI*: Ancients, 3.

¹¹² *KSA*: 13:16[10] = *WP*: 121. *Cf.*, *KSA*: 12:9[142].

¹¹³ *KSA*: 12:9[8] = *WP*: 462.

¹¹⁴ *KSA*: 12:9[157] = *WP*: 380.

element, and lacking the intolerance toward 'free spirits'. When culture is ascendant over civilization, what ensues is an increased freedom of the animal and the spirit.¹¹⁵

It is important to note that Nietzsche does not simply favour culture over civilization. Rather he actually advocates the preservation of the inherent antagonism between culture and civilization, because this reflects an opposition between human and animal life forces respectively.¹¹⁶ What he sees as the human and animal forces are not autonomous, but are in fact dependent upon each other, and a balance must be found and any slide towards polarisation should be avoided. Embracing both forces will, he believes, act as a stimulant to the cultivation of a plurality of forms of life based on evolving and diverse values, and will lead the human being beyond its current capabilities. The strength of a human being and its aspirations for greatness are reflected in its ability to contain within itself an increasing degree of struggle between the greatest pluralities of drives and instincts – including these animal passions – redolent of Müller-Lauter's model of will to power as discussed above.¹¹⁷ By maintaining this friction between animal and human life forces, an equally fertile one will result between culture and civilization.

What is not clear from Nietzsche's description of these two antagonisms is first, why taming and breeding necessarily lead to the suppression of the animal element; and secondly why cultivation should be immune from the pitfalls of civilization? Would it not be possible to have a properly functioning civilization that shapes the individual's animal instincts in the right sort of way? Conversely, one can conceive of an improperly functioning form of cultivation that leads to repression and problematic sublimations. Further light on this point is shed by Nietzsche's genealogical critique of 'bad conscience'.

3.3.2 The Inception of a Bad Conscience

Let us now examine in more detail how the suppression, and ultimately the debasement, of the human animal's natural bodily drives and instincts are instigated by the influence of civilization. In

¹¹⁵ KSA: 13:16[10] = WP: 121. Cf., KSA: 12:9[142].

¹¹⁶ KSA: 13:16[10] = WP: 121. Cf., KSA: 12:9[142].

¹¹⁷ KSA: 13:16[7].

The Genealogy – a book that predates his use of the term ‘decadence’ – Nietzsche provides an *implicit* account of this process as one that has arisen from humanity’s social development of living in relatively stable and peaceful civil societies.¹¹⁸ The original “unrestrained and shapeless” human animals are no more, having developed “into a fixed form”, such that these now “semi-animals had been finally not just kneaded and made compliant, but *shaped*.”¹¹⁹ This shaping is a product a greater social integration, and in particular the accompanying rise and observance of civil rules and codes. These social changes not only necessitate the need on the part of individuals to accommodate the adoption of the ideas or attitudes of others, but also mean that acting on certain natural instincts has become socially unacceptable.

Prior to the inauguration of civil society an individual lived instinctively. The animal drives and instincts were integrated and therefore were able to ‘aim’ the human animal towards the suitable objects at the appropriate time. A major consequence of the onset of socially regulated behaviour is the inhibition of an individual’s drives and instincts that could no longer be successfully discharged outwardly in an ‘active’ manner toward some desirable object or end. A process of internalisation destroys the former functional integration and coherence among the drives and instincts, such that they are no longer working harmoniously towards a collectively more appropriate object or end. Some drives or instincts become imprisoned within the human body due to these requirements of civil society and individuals become estranged from their animal past. As these drives and instincts that can no longer be expunged externally simply don’t disappear, they ‘seek’ gratification by turning inward for a means of expression in a ‘reactive’ fashion. When turned inward they create an increasingly rich inner world, a realm of subjectivity:

All instincts which are not discharged outwardly *turn inwards* – this is what I call the *internalization* of man: with it there now evolves in man what will later be called his ‘soul’.

¹¹⁸ GM: II, 16.

¹¹⁹ GM: II, 17.

The 'soul' is then, for Nietzsche, a contingent development of human psychology which is then "expanded and extended" and given further depth by this process of internalisation.¹²⁰

Nietzsche argues that the suppression of the human animal through the forces of civilization has led to a transformation that may be viewed as a naturalistic variant of the Christian doctrine of original sin, whereby the previously healthy animal organism metamorphoses into one of an enslaved soul. The latter is depicted in *The Genealogy* and other published writings as an untreatable sickness that is akin to a form of unconscious anguish, and is cast in the term of Nietzsche's own particular interpretation of the phenomenon of a 'bad conscience' (*das schlechte Gewissen*).¹²¹ This 'bad conscience' is portrayed as the expression of a higher humanity suffering from itself, as a result of the oppressive demands of civil society that provides no external outlet for its remaining animalistic instincts.¹²²

Failure to adhere to the society's imposed convention and conformity can result in people suffering by being punished, but even compliance will still result in alternative kind of suffering due to the above described internalisation of man. The artificial internal regulation of the animal instincts by consciousness – a feeble organ of relatively recent emergence¹²³ – means that a large amount of intrinsic vitality is consumed by a struggle within the individual by having to fight and suppress their natural inclinations: one between the body's natural configuration of amoral drives and instincts and those acculturated or developed by observing prescribed laws and customs. This struggle puts undue pressure on the newly fashioned soul, which then becomes divided and at odds with itself and forced into taking sides, promoting one part and rejecting the other, in a form of partial self-condemnation.¹²⁴ For taking pleasure in aggression, oppression, cruelty, or destruction

¹²⁰ GM: II, 16.

¹²¹ GM: II, 1, 4, 14, 16-19 & 22-23 & III, 23.

¹²² The connection between civilization, corruption and a bad conscience probably first appears in a cryptic notebook entry from 1885/1886: "Corruption of the powerful man of nature in the constraint of civilized cities (– grows into leprous parts, there the bad conscience is learnt)". (*Corruption des kräftigen Naturmenschen im Zwang der civilisirten Städte (– geräth zu den aussätzigen Bestandtheilen, lernt da das schlechte Gewissen)*), KSA: 12:2[56] = MT.

¹²³ GS: 11 & GM: II, 16.

¹²⁴ GM: II, 18.

became disruptive and damaging to the social whole to which individuals owe their prosperity and security.

For example, a person who can no longer find pleasure naturally in moulding the external world may find enjoyment in shaping the only thing he can, namely himself. Though pleasurable, this is also painful as the same person suffers from, and so comes to consider 'bad', his most natural and pleasurable drives and instincts. His own drives and instincts plague him; he is sick of himself, which gives rise to bad feelings about oneself. Tormented by his own existence, he develops a predilection for self-loathing and guilt about this errant animal nature. This is how human beings, who suffer from themselves, gradually acquire bad conscience, a kind of unconscious anguish through his own self-negation.¹²⁵ The reactive vacillating of the bad conscience in maintaining the internalisation of these aggressive drives and instincts leads to increasing internal turmoil, and ultimately the corruption of the overall configuration of the drives and instincts. As described in the first half of this chapter, the result is the onset of physiological exhaustion and weakness associated with decadence. Bad conscience then is a "sickness" (*Krankheit*),¹²⁶ a serious "illness" (*Erkrankung*)¹²⁷ that is unique to humanity in which people suffer from themselves, from acting on some of their strongest drives and instincts, as a result of the oppressive demands of civil society. And yet, bad conscience is not only seen as negative. Bad conscience is expressed in nausea, as "a sickness rather like a pregnancy",¹²⁸ for out of it also springs the rich intellectual and creative potential that characterises modern humankind. Arising as a consequence of this sickness Nietzsche claims, are "self-contradictory concepts such as *selflessness, self-denial and self-sacrifice*".¹²⁹

This last statement conveys Nietzsche's assertion that what bad conscience initiates, and what gives the soul its new-found depth are regulative ideals such as selflessness. It is through the latter that an instinctually impoverished humanity evaluates – and in some sense – elevates itself.

¹²⁵ GM: II, 1, 4, 14, 16-19 & 22-23 & III, 23.

¹²⁶ GM: II, 19.

¹²⁷ GM: II, 16.

¹²⁸ GM: II, 19.

¹²⁹ GM: II, 18.

However, Nietzsche regards such ideals, the product of an internalised cruelty, primarily as “negative”.¹³⁰ They are opposed to humanity’s more positive, natural and outward directed will to power, that strives to feel its effective agency in the overcoming resistances to appropriate ends. Recall from the discussion in the first half of this chapter that human beings have the instinctual drive to express their strength and thereby feel their power – “that very *instinct for freedom* (put into my language: the will to power)” – which they experience as pleasurable.¹³¹ The restrictions imposed by civilized society has the consequence that this instinct for freedom – their will to power – becomes dormant and turned inward into a bad conscience.¹³² This is because human beings possess aggressive drives and instincts of “[a]nimosity, cruelty, the pleasure of pursuing, raiding, changing and destroying” that need to be expressed and satisfied.¹³³ The gratification of inflicting cruelty and suffering is denied outward discharge, and so must also be turned inwards, such that individuals inflict the physical and mental suffering on themselves.

The way this self-affliction is achieved is through ascetic ideals that are self-denying via either an abstention of bodily pleasures or not pursuing one’s own interests. The ideals of selflessness, self-denial, and self-sacrifice are then self-contradictory in the sense of being modes of valuations that are negative yet self-regarding at the same time – one of self-opposition and denial of one’s own most natural functions. Ascetic ideals then are the basis of what Nietzsche sees as a model way of life that is contrary to our nature and against life in general¹³⁴ – one that he retrospectively calls a decadent ideal.¹³⁵

Nietzsche’s presentation of a bad conscience as internalised will to power then provides one important intermediate causal factor for decadence. Unlike the underlying cause of civilization, bad conscience is of an internal nature. It provides both the physiological basis of decadence and the source for the latter’s psychological expression. Bad conscience then is a necessary requirement for

¹³⁰ GM: II, 18.

¹³¹ GM: II, 18.

¹³² GM: II, 16.

¹³³ GM: II, 16.

¹³⁴ GM: III, 13.

¹³⁵ EH: GM.

the development of decadence. However, decadence can only emerge from bad conscience due to two correlations between them – the same conceptual association and a functional similarity. It is these that I will discuss next.

3.3.3 The Correlations between Bad Conscience and Decadence

The first correlation between bad conscience and decadence is that the three ‘self-contradictory’ concepts that Nietzsche claims in *The Genealogy* as arising from bad conscience – selflessness, self-denial and self-sacrifice – are all fundamentally *associated* with decadence.¹³⁶ In book five of *The Gay Science* – which appeared just prior to *The Genealogy* and its exposition of bad conscience – these three concepts are all listed as integral characteristics of morality and essential to his portrayal of “morality as a problem”,¹³⁷ which is later construed as “*the morality of decadence*”.¹³⁸ Instinctive psychological inhibitions have thereby been established which erroneously guide peoples’ behaviour, possibly turning them away from living a fulfilling and coherent life that expresses their own needs. Selflessness, self-denial and self-sacrifice are epitomised by the ascetic, who Nietzsche portrays as a “‘life *against* life’ . . . a *degenerating life*”, and is indicative of a mankind’s current state of sickness or morbidity (*Krankhaftigkeit*). I will briefly look at the role of each of these three terms in turn.¹³⁹

Self-sacrifice (*Selbstopferung*) – in the sense of giving up of one’s own interests or wishes in order to help others advance a cause – is dispensed with after *The Genealogy*, but the general conception remains.¹⁴⁰ Self-sacrifice is expressed in the second formula for decadence discussed in Chapter 1.3.2 – that of harmful instincts – where to make this sort of self-abnegation on behalf of others, consists in checking and repressing drives and instincts in order not to risk hurting or offending them. In this way Nietzsche claims human life is diminished both in vigour and in quality and so he considers such an altruistic morality to be decadent.¹⁴¹

¹³⁶ *GM*: II, 18.

¹³⁷ *GS*: 345.

¹³⁸ *TI*: Skirmishes, 35.

¹³⁹ *GM*: III, 13.

¹⁴⁰ *GM*: II, 18, & III, 11. Cf., *KSA*: 9:11[199] & 12:9[145] = *WP*: 776. Also, “instincts of . . . self-sacrifice” (*Selbstopferungs-Instinkte*), *GM*: Preface, 5, and “the self-sacrificers” (*Sich-Selbst-Opfernden*), *GS*: 345.

¹⁴¹ *TI*: Skirmishes, 35.

Selflessness (*Selbstlosigkeit*) for Nietzsche is the opposite of self-seeking.¹⁴² It is opposed to life's fundamental instincts that leads to a form of "depersonalisation" (*Entpersönlichung*) brought about by being taught decadent ideals or values.¹⁴³ Selflessness is made into a virtue in the sense of again denying and extirpating one's own instincts and drives. The prevailing decadent morality also makes a virtue of selflessness in the sense of caring for others more than one cares for oneself, as we shall see in the following chapter on the effects of decadence. "[T]he ideal of selflessness" is associated with bad conscience as early as a notebook entry from autumn 1881.¹⁴⁴ In his later works selflessness re-emerges as "that principle of decadence",¹⁴⁵ "a true sign of decadence",¹⁴⁶ and as discussed in Chapter 1.3.4, the basis for what I call his 'Christian recipe for decadence'.¹⁴⁷

Self-denial (*Selbstverleugnung*)¹⁴⁸ is portrayed as a "negative virtue",¹⁴⁹ and Nietzsche claims that self-denial of 'evil' instincts is normally considered virtuous and central to the ascetic ideal, as well as being a component of a moral ideal.¹⁵⁰ This is because according to him self-denial is part of the duties of a moralist and it is essentially part of their behaviour, their 'act'.¹⁵¹ Acting out universal

¹⁴² GS: 21, 249 & 345, BGE: 250, GM: II, 18, NCW: Antipodes, EH: Clever 2 & 8, HH, 4, D, 2, NCW, 1, KSA: 12:7[6] = WP: 275, 12:9[130] = WP: 62, 13:11[83] = WLN, pp. 214-215/WP: 674, 13:11[87] = WLN, p. 215 & 13:14[29] = WLN, pp. 242-244/WP: 373.

¹⁴³ AOM: 98, BGE: 207, "depersonalisation", EH: Destiny, 7, KSA: 12:1[202], 12:9[84] = WLN, pp. 152-153/WP: 379, 12:9[156] = WLN, pp. 167-168/WP: 296, 13:11[148] = WLN, pp. 229-230/WP: 30, 13:11[341], 13:14[64] = WLN, p. 245, 13:17[6] = WP: 44 & 13:23[3].

¹⁴⁴ "You say, 'certain beliefs [literally: articles of faith] are *beneficial* to mankind therefore they must be believed' (so every congregation has judged). But, this is **my** deed for the first time to have *demand*ed a counter-reckoning! – to have asked thusly: what unspeakable misery, what worsening of human beings has arisen by setting up the ideal of selflessness, thereby calling egoism evil, and making it *felt as evil*!! – by calling the will of man free and pushing it onto him full *responsibility*, thus the responsibility for all that is egoistic – 'called evil' – i.e., what is natural necessity according to of his essence, thus he was given a bad name and a bad conscience:". (Ihr sagt: „gewisse Glaubenssätze sind der Menschheit *heilsam*, folglich müssen sie geglaubt werden" (so hat jede Gemeinde geurtheilt). Aber das ist **meine** That, zum ersten Male die *Gegenrechnung* gefordert zu haben! — also gefragt zu haben: welches unsägliche Elend, welche Verschlechterung der Menschen dadurch entstanden ist, daß man das Ideal der Selbstlosigkeit aufstellte, also den Egoismus böse hieß und *als böse empfinden* ließ!! — dadurch daß man den Willen des Menschen frei hieß und ihm die volle Verantwortlichkeit zuschob somit die *Verantwortlichkeit* für alles Egoistische — „Böse genannte" — d.h. Naturnothwendige seines Wesens: so machte man ihm einen schlechten Ruf und ein schlechtes Gewissen:), KSA: 9:11[332] = MT. Cf., D: 456.

¹⁴⁵ NCW: Antipodes.

¹⁴⁶ EH: Destiny, 8.

¹⁴⁷ EH: D, 2.

¹⁴⁸ HH: I, 138, GS: 82 & 352, GM: II, 18, CW: 11, KSA: 10:3[1], 10:5[1], 11:25[502], 12:10[200], 13:11[54] = WP: 304 & 13:11[148] = WP: 30. Also, "self-abnegation", DS: 7, & 5 "instincts of . . . self-denial" (*Selbstverleugnungs*), GM: Preface, 5.

¹⁴⁹ GS: 304.

¹⁵⁰ KSA: 13:11[148] = WLN, pp. 229-230/WP: 30.

¹⁵¹ GS: 352 & KSA: 13:11[54] = WP: 304.

ideals of decadence – that of pity¹⁵² and (Christian) redemption for example¹⁵³ – is precisely what Nietzsche accuses Wagner – the archetypal decadent¹⁵⁴ – of doing.¹⁵⁵

The second correlation is that bad conscience and decadence *function* in a similar way as they both share the potential to produce constructive as well as detrimental outcomes. Let's take the case of a bad conscience first, which is described by Nietzsche as preceding the moralisation of the concepts of debt and duty into guilt and moral duty.¹⁵⁶ At least in its beginnings the 'pregnancy' – the creative portrayal of bad conscience can go either way it seems – it can be either positive or negative for humanity according to Nietzsche. Therefore, the result can be an 'active' bad conscience, which acts as a "true womb of ideal and imaginative events, brought a wealth of novel, disconcerting beauty and affirmation to light, and perhaps for the first time, beauty *itself*".¹⁵⁷ Or alternatively the result can be a more 'passive' bad conscience that fails to resist the onset of "the worst and most insidious illness . . . man's sickness of *man*, of *himself*",¹⁵⁸ which when left festering fosters a moralised vengefulness as practised by man of *ressentiment*.¹⁵⁹

In a similar fashion to his portrayal of bad conscience, Nietzsche presents decadence as essentially another descriptive and diagnostic conception where this 'active' and 'passive' distinction is also discernible. He clearly states in a notebook entry that decadence is not just prevalent; it is omnipresent, perennial, and above all a necessary phenomenon. Decadence is not to be reviled or banished for it is fundamental as a vital process for assuring an organism's health, and a prerequisite for a potentially superior state of health and the advancement of life:

The concept of decadence.– Waste, decay, elimination need not be condemned: they are necessary consequences of life, of the growth of life. The phenomenon of decadence is as

¹⁵² CW: 7.

¹⁵³ CW: 3 & Epilogue.

¹⁵⁴ See Chapter 5.2.

¹⁵⁵ NCW: Broke. CW: 11 associates self-denial with the Wagnerian ideal of his music expressed with a virtuous rote trained direction of *Espressivo*, which is what his decadent ideals demand according to Nietzsche.

¹⁵⁶ GM: II, 21.

¹⁵⁷ GM: II, 18.

¹⁵⁸ GM: II, 16.

¹⁵⁹ GM: II, 11.

necessary as any increase and advance of life: one is in no position to abolish it. Reason demands, on the contrary, that we do justice to it.¹⁶⁰

Nietzsche's reasoning is that although the breakdown of the prevailing structure of drives and instincts through decadence may invariably endanger a given form of life, the condition does also provide the opportunity of liberating that form of life from the constraints imposed upon it by that structure. A potential wholesale reconfiguration of drives and instincts, including those life-affirming ones that are currently suppressed, brings the chance for positive developments that would not otherwise occur.¹⁶¹

In order to compare this similar functionality of bad conscience and decadence, I will for two reasons use Nietzsche's portrayal of nihilism as an example of the latter that displays this potential for differing outcomes. The first reason is as I briefly mentioned in the introduction to this chapter, Nietzsche clearly states that nihilism is not a cause of decadence, but instead a product of its logic.¹⁶² The second reason is that in a number of notebook entries he presents nihilism as a *general type*¹⁶³ or *typical form*¹⁶⁴ of decadence, and one that he has analysed in some considerable depth.¹⁶⁵ He argues for two general types of nihilism, where the first is a basic 'historic' concern and the second is a more pressing 'contemporary' issue. The latter is subsequently divided into two further forms, one possessing the negative connotations and the other positive ones.¹⁶⁶ Let us examine how Nietzsche arrives at this dichotomy of nihilism.

Recall that in the Chapter 1.4, I presented Nietzsche's original or first type of nihilism as a pessimistic belief that repudiates everything in this world as without ultimate value and meaning – a "practical and theoretical *nihilism*".¹⁶⁷ The inexplicability of life in general and its accompanying suffering in particular, results in a need for some sort of meaning however. This meaning is provided

¹⁶⁰ KSA: 13:14[75] = WP: 40.

¹⁶¹ See Schacht (1983), p. 274.

¹⁶² KSA: 13:14[86] = WLN, pp. 248-249/WP: 43.

¹⁶³ KSA: 13:17[6]. Cf., WP: 44.

¹⁶⁴ KSA: 13:14[94] = WP: 435. Cf., KSA: 13:14[13].

¹⁶⁵ KSA: 13:15[13].

¹⁶⁶ KSA: 12:5[71] = WLN, pp. 116-121/WP: 4.

¹⁶⁷ KSA: 12:5[71] = WLN, pp. 116-121/WP: 4.

by way of the construction of explanations in the form of religious beliefs that attempt to elucidate our existence; to provide our life with sense and purpose. Acceptance of these explanations produces new and prescriptive guiding principles for society fashioned into conforming moral codes – such as Christian morality. These moral codes function as an “antidote” to the first type of nihilism and as a means for attaining that defined purpose of our existence.¹⁶⁸ However, if the purpose of religious morality gets called into question, the resulting disappointment and breakdown in the influence of this guiding principle to society may be so corrosive that nothing of value will remain. In Nietzsche’s view, this is essentially what was happening in his contemporary modern Europe.¹⁶⁹ A reduction in the perceived uncertainty of the world through greater education and economic prosperity for example, has resulted in the diminishing need for the meaning provided by a belief in God, and as a result has fostered a prevailing “*European Nihilism*”. This second type of nihilism he declares to be “*ambiguous*”, and is subsequently refined into two contrasting forms that he views as different responses to this loss of meaning and normlessness.¹⁷⁰

If we no longer believe in Christian morality as the prevailing antidote to the original form of nihilism, we may look for a new one. Although our faith in Christian values may have disappeared, the need for the absolutes that characterised such a faith has remained intact however. This explains attempts to recast such values into more secular presentations, such as that of a Kantian morality founded on Christian principles, which still may be scorned as restrictive or incomprehensible to the average individual. The newly engendered non-believers may be left stranded in a hopeless situation, in a ‘passive’ form of nihilism which is indicative of a weak *reactive* agent. Yet there is still a possibility that these non-believers may suppose there is no need for *any* antidote, and so the existing explanations might then be seen as no longer applicable to this revised reflection on life. If this is the case, the hitherto highest values contained in them are now seen as wanting. These values are to be subjected to a complete revaluation, which is therefore an ‘active’ form of nihilism and

¹⁶⁸ KSA: 12:5[71] = *WLN*, pp. 116-121/*WP*: 4.

¹⁶⁹ *GS*: 346

¹⁷⁰ KSA: 12:9[35] = *WLN*, pp. 146-147/*WP*: 22.

indicative of a strong *active* agent.¹⁷¹ Such a revaluation would demonstrate an end to the superficial contentment provided by these lingering and failing values. Together with the demise of an indifferent attitude towards the creation of new ones, as exemplified in Nietzsche's conception of the contemptuous stagnating 'the last human' (*der letzte Mensch*).¹⁷² Rather, an opportunity then arises for the strong to rethink and challenge the traditional frameworks and values, and establish new ones in their place.

Nietzsche's own disambiguation of nihilism takes active nihilism to be "a sign of *the increased power of the spirit*", as opposed to the passive variety "as a *decline and retreat of the spirit's power*".¹⁷³ If one construes the meaning of spirit here as the appliance of life in its need for the feeling for growth or power – to exert one's will to power –¹⁷⁴ then this categorisation in turn provides a dichotomy of decadents.¹⁷⁵ Therefore, one can speak of a 'passive' decadent that is weak and lacking spirit, which is reflected in an inability to resist decadence. This type of decadent is exemplified by Saint Paul, whose Gospel according to Nietzsche is a poisonous and invented history of Christianity that simply 'gives in' to decadence by negating life.¹⁷⁶ Whereas by contrast one can also speak of an 'active' decadent that is a stronger, spirited individual, who attempts to give a new stimulant to life, someone – at least superficially – who is not unlike Socrates with his ideal of rationality. However, although Socrates makes a concerted effort by this means to seek a cure for decadence, it ultimately turns out to be both a mistaken approach and an impossible task. Nietzsche declares that people like Socrates are mistaken if they "think that they are going to extricate themselves from decadence by waging war on it". An 'active' and more circumspect decadent won't

¹⁷¹ KSA: 12:9[35] = *WLN*, pp. 146-147/*WP*: 23.

¹⁷² "[T]he last human being", *Z*: I, Prologue, 5.

¹⁷³ KSA: 12:9[35] = *WLN*, pp. 146-147/*WP*: 22.

¹⁷⁴ *BGE*: 230.

¹⁷⁵ See Benson (2008), p. 133.

¹⁷⁶ *A*: 42.

waste their energy fighting decadence directly like the *reactive* Socrates with his new *agôn* that Nietzsche portrays as “‘rationality at any cost’”.¹⁷⁷

According to Nietzsche, rather than fighting decadence one should adjust to its presence by seeking ways to come to terms with it. To incorporate decadence into our lives as Nietzsche claims he does, and be an ‘active’ decadent. He embraces his fate – *amor fati* –¹⁷⁸ but also undertakes a revaluation of all values, which is his “formula for an act of humanity's highest self-examination”.¹⁷⁹ This is an attempt to be rid “of humanity's ‘metaphysical need’”¹⁸⁰ – a conception I will examine in more detail in the following chapter – by seeking new values that are not hostile to life,¹⁸¹ but will rather stimulate new forms of life.¹⁸² However, apart from himself and a select few individuals which includes his idol Goethe, the effects of bad conscience and decadence alike are overwhelmingly negative: bad conscience induces feelings of anguish, whilst decadence manifests itself as a partial rejection of life that the decadent may well be oblivious to. Moreover, nihilism understood as a form of decadence, may exacerbate the turn against life by its recognition of the meaningless of life, as will be discussed in the next chapter.¹⁸³

I would like to end this chapter with an interpretation of notebook entry from spring 1888 that is possibly the sole occurrence in Nietzsche's entire oeuvre where the concepts of bad conscience and decadence are mentioned together:

¹⁷⁷ *TI*: Socrates, 11.

¹⁷⁸ *EH*: Clever, 10.

¹⁷⁹ *EH*: Destiny, 2.

¹⁸⁰ *EH*: HH, 6.

¹⁸¹ *EH*: Destiny, 7.

¹⁸² *A*: 13 & 61, *EH*: Wise, 1, Clever, 9, Books, 1.

¹⁸³ For this reason, Benson (2008), p. 133, argues that that nihilism should be considered a subcategory of decadence since for him, nihilism is the recognition of the meaningless of life, and decadence is a turning against life. However, presumably one can be a decadent by turning against life but without finding life to be meaningless – perhaps too painful rather than too pointless. Benson's general point follows Conway (1997), p. 109: “All nihilists are also decadents, but not all decadents are nihilists”.

The typical decadents, who feel *necessary* in their corruption of style, who want to claim a higher taste and impose a law on the *others*, the Goncourts, the Richard Wagners, are to be distinguished from the decadents with a bad conscience, the *unruly* decadents –¹⁸⁴

In this quote Nietzsche uses the notion of a bad conscience to make his own distinction between two types of decadent: an ‘unruly’ (*widerspänstigen*) – as opposed to – a ‘typical’ (*typische*) kind.¹⁸⁵

A brief exposition of these two types will clarify further the parameters of the immediate cause of decadence – a physiological disorder of the self that is explained in terms of a lack of will to power – as well as facilitate an agenda for an understanding of its effects that follows in the next chapter.

One possible interpretation of this contrast of decadents is that the ‘unruly’ type is referred to as such because their drives and instincts are in an acutely ‘disgregated’ state of anarchic disorder.¹⁸⁶ This anarchy is indicative of a person either ceasing to be someone or failing to become someone, for lack of an organizing idea to guide the self-development.¹⁸⁷ So any substantive psychological expression of their underlying decadence is yet to emerge, as illustrated by the case of the Athenians in the era of Socrates:

[D]egeneration was quietly gaining ground everywhere: old Athens was coming to an end . . . Everywhere, instincts were in anarchy; everywhere, people were five steps away from excess: the *monstrum in animo* [monster in soul] was a universal danger. ‘The drives want to act like tyrants; an even stronger counter-tyrant needs to be invented’ . . . people had stopped being masters of themselves and the instincts had turned *against* each other . . . Socrates was

¹⁸⁴ Die typischen *décadents*, die sich *nothwendig* fühlen in ihrer Verderbniß des Stils, die damit einen höheren Geschmack in Anspruch nehmen und den *Anderen* ein Gesetz auflegen möchten, die Goncourts, die Richard Wagner, sind zu unterscheiden von den *décadents* mit schlechtem Gewissen, die *widerspänstigen* *décadents* —, KSA: 13:15[88] = MT.

¹⁸⁵ EH: Clever, 5 & BT, 1, CW: 5 & 7, A: 30 & 51 & KSA: 13:15[88].

¹⁸⁶ CW: 7 & KSA: 11:43[2].

¹⁸⁷ Akin to ‘unruly’ (*widerspänstig*), Nietzsche uses the conception of “conflicting instincts” (*Instinkt-Widersprüchlichkeit*) for those who lack a centre of gravity and hence a purpose, which he claims ultimately results in selfless pursuits of “‘depersonalization’”, EH: Destiny, 7, and “contradictoriness of instincts”, CW: Epilogue, KSA: 13:23[3] & 13:25[1]. A similar conception is “the expression of physiological contradictoriness” (*der Ausdruck der physiologischen Widersprüchlichkeit*), that accounts for individuals who seeks ‘answers’ to questions concerning happiness, virtue and salvation of their soul, KSA: 13:14[94] = WP: 435.

fascinating . . . mainly in the fact that he was an answer, a solution, the manifestation of a *cure* for this case.¹⁸⁸

‘Unruly’ decadents are depicted as confined by their bad conscience to merely a form of bewildered anguish that just reacts to external events, instead of any form of directed agency. Although they recognise a need, they have not yet channelled their internalised and divided will (or according to Müller-Lauter: wills) to power into *embracing* a supportive selfless ideal; one that can account for and give meaning to their suffering as well as a semblance of direction to their lives, such as ascetic ideal, or Socrates’ proposed cure of “*absurdly*” overt rationality in the above case.¹⁸⁹ The adoption of any such ideal restores or creates some order within their drive configuration – if only to be tyrannized by it – but with the consequence that their bad conscience will develop into entrenched expressions of decadence.

Such a scenario occurs because the physical and mental weakness associated with anarchic instinctual disarray, and the consequent meaningless suffering of a bad conscience, is more than most individuals can bear. The physiological disorder brought about by vacillating bad conscience results in exhausted and weak-willed individuals seeking a ‘solution’ for their condition. They are now susceptible to proselytizing and indoctrination by others who offer remedial prescriptions. This is because the decline in their will to power means they lack the energy and motivation to resist their condition or evaluate the proposed ‘cures’. Hence, by contrast to the anarchic instincts of the ‘unruly’, a tyrannized yet still corrupted configuration is more ‘typical’ – the decadent norm.¹⁹⁰ Nevertheless the latter still falls short of the paradigm of a well-ordered instinctual arrangement that provides the individual with the vitality to pursue a life worth living and flourish. This is why Nietzsche tells us that “[t]he sort of religious people the church *wants* are typical decadents”.¹⁹¹ This other type of decadent then is someone who is willing to embrace and succumb to a life-inhibiting

¹⁸⁸ *TJ*: Socrates, 9.

¹⁸⁹ *TJ*: Socrates, 10.

¹⁹⁰ *BGE*: 188.

¹⁹¹ *A*: 51.

decadent ideal, and probably become an evangelical proponent for it. For example, this is how Nietzsche interprets Socrates' rationality,¹⁹² Epicurus' ethical hedonism,¹⁹³ and Richard Wagner's Christian redemption.¹⁹⁴ This is the reason why these individuals all earn Nietzsche's opprobrium of being 'typical decadents', as adhering in their own way to the following historical trend:

[P]hilosophers and moralists . . . were among the most powerful promoters of decadence. . . the philosophers of Greece, e.g., Plato . . . represent one after the other the typical forms of decadence: the moral-religious idiosyncrasy, anarchism, nihilism (*adiaphora*) [indifference], cynicism, obduracy, hedonism, reaction.¹⁹⁵

I shall examine how and why these forms of psychological capitulation take place in more detail in the next chapter on the effects of decadence.

3.4 Conclusion

In this chapter I have argued that the aetiology of decadence can be ascribed to a combination of causal factors. As we have seen in the first-half of the chapter, for Nietzsche the *immediate cause* of decadence in the individual is a physiological disorder of the self that is explained in terms of a lack of will to power. Although I have argued the latter's exact functioning changes across his later oeuvre, this process is nevertheless explicitly stated in two distinct forms, in both his published writings as well as his notebooks. The *underlying cause* of civilization is also *explicitly* stated, but only in a notebook entry, whilst an *implicit* account can be found in *The Genealogy*. A result of this underlying cause is the *intermediate cause* of the inception of bad conscience as a sort of internal catalyst of decadence, which can only really be *implicitly* grasped, mainly again from its portrayal in *The Genealogy*, although a notebook entry provides a degree of explicit confirmation. The resulting

¹⁹² EH: BT, 1.

¹⁹³ A: 30.

¹⁹⁴ CW: 5 & 7.

¹⁹⁵ KSA: 13:14[94] = WP: 435.

dynamic from these three causes can now perhaps be best summarised from both micro and macro perspectives, where the former describes how decadence began and the latter why it proliferates.

At the micro level, the assorted factors that give rise to decadence can be briefly condensed into the following key stages of a causal ordering. The dominant domesticating agenda of a developing civil society provided no external outlet for an individual's remaining animalistic instincts, which then turn inward for their expression. The restraint and redirection of an individual's natural will to power turned into a bad conscience of anguish, and then guilt, about expressing their animalistic instincts. This disposition for repression and compunction resulted in the infliction of suffering on themselves through negative self-denying practices and ideals. As a consequence the bad conscience intensified, as did the inner turmoil of their instincts and in some instances the underlying drives and instincts were sublimated and 'civilized away'. The result is the all-important instinctual corruption resulting in physiological exhaustion and weakness of will, a condition that Nietzsche conceptualises as a lack of will to power and the onset of decadence.¹⁹⁶ The now vulnerable individual produces – or becomes susceptible to – interpretations offering meaning for the suffering associated with a bad conscience. A moral interpretation is provided by religious authorities, thereby codifying suffering and weakness into life-inhibiting decadent ideals and beliefs. These principles subsequently get passed on to others, for example, in the form of Christian morality, and either initiates their own decadence or to sustains it.

Decadence then is a spiralling process, which can be summarised in the following way by focussing also on the macro level. The stimulation of mankind's humanity by suppressing its animality as championed by civilization has left individuals estranged from part of the natural self,

¹⁹⁶ Therefore I would agree with Conway (1997), p. 48: "Nietzsche consequently locates decadence in the natural, inevitable failure of the invisible body to sustain an efficient propagation through itself of the will to power." Acharya (2014), p. 109, basically concurs albeit with a caveat: "To be sure, making the claim that, for a body, the process of decadence is inevitable is not incorrect . . . [h]owever, noting the inevitability or naturalness of decadence should not deter us from inquiring into the ambiguity of the phenomenon". However, Conway (1997), p. 37 & pp. 50-51, also questions the importance of the conception of will to power in Nietzsche's later works, claiming it is merely one expression of his more on-going interest in vitalism. The latter is the idea that life cannot be explained by the principles of mechanism, but only by the unconscious propagation and discharge of vital forces.

prompting, Nietzsche thinks, the degeneration of human life and culture. The result has been the collapse of the structural integrity between the individual and the 'master' culture that once made them a whole, functioning in unison in a mutual empowering relationship. This is because the rise of civil society weakened and tamed the individual's original animal tendencies for self-expression, eventual turning them into a member of a herd merely conforming to its collective wishes. The now weakened herd animal produced a denaturalised form of morality that contains an overly aggressive denial of animal forces as typified by Christianity.¹⁹⁷ Any opposition to this repressive domination and reassertion of individuality would require a strong person with the singular virtues born out of animal impulses that hark back to their earlier, natural and freer environment – the kind of qualities according to Nietzsche, required by a prisoner fleeing incarceration and striving to avoid recapture. However, such virtues have been "ostracized" by the obedient members of the herd, and their prescription for the collective well-being have in fact made the likes of a non-conformist ill by suppressing this kind of instinctual behaviour – it has been a stimulus for decadence and "the *recipe* for physiological degeneration".¹⁹⁸

¹⁹⁷ KSA: 12:10[77] = WP: 215.

¹⁹⁸ TI: Skirmishes, 45.

Chapter 4: The Effects of Decadence

4.1 Introduction

In the previous chapter I argued that decadence has three interrelated causes. The first, the *underlying cause*, is external pertaining to the debilitating influences of civil society upon humanity. The second, the *intermediate cause*, is the development of a bad conscience that Nietzsche portrays as an illness pertinent to a civilized humanity, the product of a process of internalisation and repression of some of the individual's natural drives and instincts. The faltering attempts by a bad conscience in maintaining the behavioural straitjacket imposed by civil society, leads to excessive internal turmoil and ultimately physiological degradation of the human being, when some of these drives and instincts are 'civilized away'. Finally, the third and most *immediate cause* of decadence is this resulting physiological disorder of the self, which Nietzsche explains in terms of a lack of will to power.

At a fundamental level, will to power can be interpreted as essentially describing a blending of the normally distinct physiological and the psychological components of an individual's behaviour. A detrimental configuration of the former ultimately leads to exhaustion, resulting in adverse psychological effects, especially a weakness of will as well as other forms of disorder and distress. So far, I have argued that what Nietzsche *principally* means by decadence is a life-inhibiting process of physiological decline. Yet most commentators – and indeed Nietzsche himself on a frequent basis – take the term 'decadence' to mean the subsequent psychological expressions of weakness and suffering that in extreme cases lead to life denial. I believe there is a need to distinguish between the two meanings. Hence, for the sake of clarity, and when the context demands it, I will use my own terminology, and distinguish between 'physiological-decadence' and 'psychological-decadence'. In fact this is a distinction that Nietzsche partially alludes to, especially in his notebooks. For example he discusses how certain practices "*accelerates* the decadence . . . – both physiologically and as well

as psychologically”.¹ Furthermore, he specifically refers to “physiological decadence” or “physiological decadents” a number of times.² He also mentions a general “[p]sychology of decadence”³, Baudelaire’s “psychological observations relating to *décadence*”,⁴ and also the “spiritual (i.e., symbolic-psychological) as decadence”,⁵ by which he means instances of a “decadence ideal”⁶ or “values of decadence”,⁷ such as those of Christianity for instance. Nietzsche frequently speaks of “symptom[s] of decadence”,⁸ expressing various “type[s] of decadence”,⁹ that serve as a “tool of decadence”.¹⁰ More generally speaking then, an entity such as a work of art or a political ideal is an expression of psychological-decadence when it also has a physiological-decadence deep cause.

By up to this point abiding roughly by Nietzsche’s own amalgamated notion of a ‘physio-psychology’, rather than my own analysis of decadence as a dichotomy of ‘physiological-decadence’ and ‘psychological-decadence’, means that I inevitably commented on the psychological effects of decadence in the previous chapter dedicated to its causes. The effects of decadence will be the main focus of this chapter.

Nietzsche’s mid-1888 notebook entries do provide summaries of the effects of decadence, an example of which was presented in Chapter 1.3.¹¹ In this chapter I will limit my discussion to what

¹ [D]ie *décadence beschleunigt* . . . — sowohl physiologisch, als psychologisch. . . , KSA: 13:14[210] = MT.

² [P]hysiologische *décadence*, KSA: 3:15[10] = WP: 851, *physiologischen decadence*, KSA: 13:14[222], 13:14[224], 13:17[8] = WP: 38, *physiologischer decadence*, 13:14[13], *physiologisch decadents*, 13:15[32], 13:15[34], & “physiological decline, decadence.”, (*physiologischen Rückgang, eine decadence.*), A: 17. Also, “the decadence of race” (*die Rassen-décadence*), KSA: 13:14[25].

³ *Psychologie der decadence*, KSA: 13:14[77] = MT.

⁴ *Psychologics der decadence*, KGB: III:5[(1888)/#1000] = SL, p. 287.

⁵ [G]eistliche (d.h. symbolisch-psychologische) als *décadence*, KSA: 13:11[365].

⁶ [*Décadence-Ideal*], EH: GM, CW: 11.

⁷ [*Décadence-Werthe*], A: 6, EH: *Destiny* 7, 13:23[3] & KGB: III:5[(1888)/#1151] = SL, p. 327.

⁸ *Ti*: Skirmishes, 41, EH: *Wise*, 1 & *BT*, 2, KSA: 11:35[27] = WP: 899, 12:7[20] & 13:11[375] = WP: 427, 13:14[92] = WP: 433, 13:14[168] = WP: 586 & 13:24[1].

⁹ KSA: 12:10[96] = WP: 174, 13:11[10], 13:14[102] = WP: 45, 13:14[86] = WP: 43, 13:14[123] = *WLN*, pp. 258-260/WP: 685, 13:14[156], 13:14[169], 13:14[181], 13:14[182] = WP: 864, 13:15[13], 13:15[20], 13:15[35] = WP: 85, 13:16[51] & 13:17[6] = WP: 44.

¹⁰ KSA: 13:14[154] = WP: 584.

¹¹ KSA: 13:14[73], 13:14[74] = WP: 42, 13:14[86] = *WLN*, pp. 248-249/WP: 43, 13:15[32], 13:17[1], 13:17[6] = WP: 44, & 13:23[4].

I regard as the most profound effects of decadence. These are captured in the following two sentences from *Ecce Homo*:¹²

Knowledge, saying yes to reality, is just as necessary for the strong as cowardice and *fleeing* in the face of reality – which is to say the 'ideal' – is for the weak, who are inspired by weakness . . . They are not free to know: decadents *need* lies, it is one of the conditions for their preservation.¹³

Let's examine this passage in a little more detail. First, there is mention of weakness, which for Nietzsche is the opposite of a healthy will to power.¹⁴ Secondly, Nietzsche refers to knowledge and knowing, which I interpret as a specific epistemological consideration. The inherent weakness of a subject is reflected in their knowledge claims and choice of supporting ideals. Thirdly, I interpret 'fleeing from reality' for the haven of the ideal as denoting a specific preference for metaphysical abstractions. Lastly, I the assertion that decadents are 'not free' I interpret as reference to their inhibited agency. In what follows I will treat these aspects of decadence – the psychological, the epistemological, the metaphysical and agential – as the four main properties of decadence. The structure of this chapter has accordingly, four interlocking sections.

I will begin by elucidating the manner in which the failure to resist psychological-decadence manifests itself in various forms of psychological weakness. This includes an inability to cope with the resulting suffering. Secondly, building upon the latter, I argue that decadents are unable or unwilling to evaluate knowledge claims due to a propensity for a kind of scepticism that reflects their inherent weakness. Thirdly, I elucidate how Nietzsche's decadent rejects the 'truth' of reality and instead embraces the 'falsity' of abstract, metaphysical ideals to compensate for his weakness. Lastly, I discuss the most pernicious effect, the decadent's lack of agential autonomy.

¹² A notebook entry lists the traits of the "Psychology of the good: a *decadent*" (Psychologie des Guten: ein *décadent*), and "The *decadence-instinct* in the good" (Der *décadence-Instinkt* im Guten), that includes and expands upon the smaller criteria I discuss, KSA: 13:23[4] = MT. Cf., KSA: 13:16[77].

¹³ EH: BT, 2.

¹⁴ A: 2. Cf., A: 57.

4.2 The Psychological: Weakness and Suffering

4.2.1 Decadence in the Pejorative Sense

As we saw in Chapter 3.3.3, the term ‘decadence’ can be purely descriptive for Nietzsche. Decadence is only regarded as problematic when it threatens to affect the entire organism and person. Not decadence *per se* – which is to a degree inevitable – but an inability to offer resistance to a potential contagion of the remaining healthy drives and instincts, is in fact the problem.¹⁵ The passages from *The Anti-Christ* cited in Chapter 3.2.1 collectively suggest that this ability and inability to resist refer to personal attributes that refer beyond the purely physiological, and to the psychological. Indeed, in one notebook entry Nietzsche makes various recommendations on avoiding any contagion.¹⁶ Since he believes some form of physiological-decadence is inevitable, what is important is that one finds the ability and motivation to resist it. This unavoidability means the individual must pro-actively prevent the physiological instability turning into psychological weakness. In another notebook entry sketching out the potential contents of a book, a possible chapter dedicated to “the typical expressions of decadence” lists among other attributes that “you choose what speeds up fatigue . . . you do not know how to resist . . . one craves painlessness”.¹⁷

Nietzsche contends that an individual’s declining will to power in general – and the loss of native vitality in particular – are expressed in a disinclination for resistance along with an eschewal of the needs of the self. These deficiencies result in a “kind of self-destruction . . . [t]hat is the type of decadence”,¹⁸ a loss of centre of gravity, selflessness, ‘unselfing’,¹⁹ and depersonalization that were introduced in previous chapters.²⁰ All of these attributes turn the inevitable and descriptive sense of physiological-decadence into a distinctly disparaging one – let me call it, analogous to Leiter’s MPS – decadence in the pejorative sense, DPS for short. When Nietzsche labels some entity as ‘decadent’,

¹⁵ KSA: 13:15[31] = WP: 41.

¹⁶ KSA: 13:14[206].

¹⁷ [D]ie typischen Ausdrucksformen der *décadence* . . . man wählt, was die Erschöpfung beschleunigt . . . man weiß nicht zu widerstehen . . . man ersehnt Schmerzlosigkeit . . . , KSA: 13:17[1] = MT.

¹⁸ KSA: 13:14[102] = WP: 45.

¹⁹ EH: D, 2.

²⁰ EH: Destiny, 7.

he often means DPS. Therefore, there is a very strong suggestion that this physical exhaustion is to be construed in various forms of psychological expressions of weakness, or what I term ‘psychological-decadence’ in the pejorative sense. In order support this supposition of a DPS, I will next discuss a representative number of the numerous forms of psychological weakness that Nietzsche mentions, together with some of his supporting examples. To facilitate a better understanding I have categorised these forms of psychological weakness into two groups; the first is a psychology of sickness and morbidity, and the second is a psychology of error and *ressentiment*.

4.2.2 The Psychology of Sickness and Morbidity

The psychological weakness to protect the remaining healthy drives and instincts against further contagion is expressed in an individual’s propensity for what Nietzsche terms in *Twilight of the Idols* ‘sickness’ (*Krankhaftigkeit*), and in *Ecce Homo*, “psychological morbidity” (*psychologische Morbidität*).²¹ In *The Genealogy* Nietzsche claims that an effect of the process of civilization and taming of humanity – the *underlying cause* of decadence – is a physiological predisposition for sickness that results in exhaustion and a loathing for life:

[E]verywhere where the civilization and taming of man took place, reveals a major fact, the *sickness* of the type of man who has lived up till now, at least of the tamed man, the physiological struggle of man with death (to be more exact: with disgust at life, with exhaustion and with the wish for the ‘end’).²²

The claim merely above implicit above that sickness is an effect of decadence is later explicitly reiterated in a notebook entry.²³ Sickness is further defined in another entry: “the lack of strength to resist the danger of infections, etc., the broken resistance; *morally* speaking, resignation and meekness in face of the enemy”.²⁴ Before we examine the ideas contained in these two quotes in more detail, we should note that for Nietzsche there is an important distinction to be made between *sickness* and *sickness*. An individual can be sick without being a sickly decadent. We can think of

²¹ *EH*: *Clever*, 5.

²² *GM*: III, 13.

²³ *KSA*: 13:14[73] = *WP*: 42.

²⁴ *KSA*: 13:14[65] = *WP*: 47.

sickness as a condition that is a necessary part of life, such as gaining immunity in childhood from further bouts of disease in later life.²⁵ By contrast, what Nietzsche describes as sickliness denotes a certain propensity for two important indicators of psychological weakness that are explicitly referred to in the second quote above – lack of resistance, and resignation. I will start with the former.

The first important indicator of psychological weakness, which Nietzsche actually mentions twice, is an individual's mental incapacity for resistance towards the factors that threaten his ability to flourish.²⁶ For Nietzsche, growth and expansion and an awareness of one's power(s) are usually generated by means of resistance.²⁷ Successfully overcoming resistance results in feelings of pleasure, whereas displeasure follows from an inability to offer resistance.²⁸ He claims that only strong constitutions will seek out resistance, since resistance is indicative of strength, just as a protracted thirst for revenge is a sign of weakness.²⁹ Moreover, an individual's mental resolve is reflected in their tolerance for pain and the ability to endure and use this capability to their advantage.³⁰ As a contrasting example, Nietzsche claims in *The Anti-Christ* that the doctrine of redemption reflects "two *physiological realities*": hatred of reality and an inherent aversion to pain.³¹ Both of these instinctive characteristics are revealed in the example of the psychology of redeemers – as personified by Jesus – and their visceral inability to fight, endure, and overcome opposition.³² For him, Christians are not characterised by their faith but by the way they fail to offer resistance to those who do them harm,³³ such as Jesus passively accepting his fate³⁴ by turning the other cheek.³⁵

The second important indicator of psychological weakness, resignation, that Nietzsche mentions is related to resistance. He associates the inability to resist with a propensity for

²⁵ EH: Wise, 2 & KSA: 13:14[157] = WLN, pp. 261-262/WP: 778.

²⁶ A: 29.

²⁷ KSA: 13:11[111] = WLN, pp. 220-221/WP: 704.

²⁸ KSA: 13:14[80] = WLN, p. 247/WP: 693.

²⁹ EH: Wise, 7.

³⁰ KSA: 12:10[118] = WP: 382.

³¹ A: 30.

³² A: 29.

³³ A: 33.

³⁴ A: 35.

³⁵ KSA: 13:11[239] = WP: 207.

submission and resignation.³⁶ The reference to these tendencies is an allusion to Schopenhauer's conception of resignation,³⁷ an ascetic attitude in which desires are not satisfied but rather given up due to the inevitable suffering incurred in the pursuit of their unachievable fulfilment. "Life is not worthwhile"; 'resignation;' is Nietzsche's concise summary of his stance.³⁸ He believes this pessimistic recoil away from life is indicative of a belief in the utter lack of value in living and willing as an individual,³⁹ and is the consequence of a lack of self-control by 'giving in' (*Nachgeben*) to one's crumbling instincts which have been undermined by the morality of decadence.⁴⁰ Nietzsche states in another notebook entry that the decadent has "[t]he *inability to resist: e.g., in suffering*, — he gives in",⁴¹ and elsewhere that not letting oneself go is his "highest guiding principle".⁴² Socrates is cited as an example of the former in the way he allows his rationality to tyrannise his soul. He clearly demonstrates that "any concession (*Nachgeben*) to the instincts, to the unconscious, leads *downwards*",⁴³ which is analogous to the alcoholic's submission to his cravings for a drink and the end to his attempts at sobriety.

By comparison to Socrates and the alcoholic, in *Ecce Homo* Nietzsche describes his own battle to liberate himself from the pernicious effects of "Idealism"⁴⁴ as beginning with the moment his "instinct made the inexorable decision to stop giving in".⁴⁵ In proclaiming "I took myself in hand", Nietzsche declares that he possessed sufficient residual physical health, psychological strength and an "instinctive certainty" (*Instinkt-Gewissheit*) for what to do for his rehabilitation. A 'complete' decadent by contrast lacks these attributes and ability.⁴⁶ As Jacqueline Scott argues, Nietzsche characterises himself as a 'strong' decadent in comparison with the vast majority of 'weak'

³⁶ GS: 326 & KSA: 13:11[104] = *WLN*, p. 220/*WP*: 790.

³⁷ KSA: 12:2[110] = *WLN*, pp. 80-82.

³⁸ KSA: 12:9[107] = *WP*: 35.

³⁹ *TJ*: Skirmishes, 24.

⁴⁰ KSA: 13:14[113] = *WP*: 334 & 13:14[157] = *WLN*, pp. 261-262/*WP*: 778.

⁴¹ [D]ie Widerstands-Unfähigkeit: z.B. im Mitleiden, — er giebt nach . . ., KSA: 13:23[4] = *MT*.

⁴² *TJ*: Skirmishes, 47.

⁴³ *TJ*: Socrates, 10.

⁴⁴ *EH*: HH, 1.

⁴⁵ *EH*: HH, 4.

⁴⁶ Although this conception of a 'complete' decadent is a useful one, the original German is literally: 'the decadent *per se*' (der *décadent an sich*), *EH*: Wise, 2. Cf., KSA: 13:24[1].

decadents although this is a distinction Nietzsche does not explicitly make.⁴⁷ Whereas ‘complete’ decadents – or in Scott’s terms ‘weak’ decadents – instinctively choose the means to do themselves harm because they are not sufficiently healthy to make themselves well again. They are predisposed to⁴⁸ the psychological attribute of morbidity⁴⁹ – another stated effect of the *underlying cause* of civilization⁵⁰ – reflected in an abnormal and unhealthy interest in subjects such as death, and in creating or adopting life-denying values that have grown out of a physiological “morbid soil”.⁵¹ For Nietzsche, Christianity is a prime example of the latter,⁵² a type of psychological-decadence.⁵³ He claims “morbidly inclined individuals” are attracted to the religious person’s training in atonement and redemption,⁵⁴ which is just a systemized form of *folie circulaire*⁵⁵ – or what is now referred to as ‘bipolar affective disorder’.⁵⁶

According to Nietzsche then, one becomes a ‘complete’ or ‘weak’ decadent when one ‘gives in’, unable to summon the ‘will-power’ to resist the contagion of one’s remaining healthy drives and instincts. In the notebook entry that defined sickness, Nietzsche goes on to explain that the inclination for capitulation is due to a lack of strength to struggle on, and moreover, one covets weakness:

N.B. One *wants* weakness: why? Usually because one is *necessarily* weak. –*Weakness as a task*: weakening the desires, the feelings of pleasure and displeasure, the will to power, to a sense of pride, to want to have and have more; weakening as meekness; weakening as faith; weakening as aversion and shame in the face of everything natural, as negation of life, as sickness and habitual weakness—weakening as the renunciation of revenge, of resistance, of enmity and wrath . . . one does not want to fight weakness with a *systeme fortifiant* [a method

⁴⁷ Scott (1998), pp. 59-60 & p. 65.

⁴⁸ *TI*: Skirmishes, 36.

⁴⁹ *EH*: Wise, 2 & Clever, 5, *KSA*: 13:14[119] = *WP*: 812.

⁵⁰ *KSA*: 13:14[182] = *WP*: 864.

⁵¹ *A*: 51, *TI*: Skirmishes, 35, *KSA*: 13:14[113] = *WP*: 334.

⁵² *KSA*: 13:15[61] = 236 & 13:16[15] = *WP*: 438. *Cf.*, *A*: 24.

⁵³ *KSA*: 12:10[96] = *WLN*, p. 190/*WP*: 174.

⁵⁴ *KSA*: 13:14[181] = *WP*: 232.

⁵⁵ A termed coined in 1851 by the French psychiatrist Jean-Pierre Falret for alternating cycles of manic excitement and depression.

⁵⁶ *EH*: Destiny, 8 & *KSA*: 12:7[3] = *WLN*, pp. 130-131/*WP*: 677. *Cf.*, *A*: 20.

that strengthens], but rather with a kind of justification and *moralization*; i.e., with an *interpretation*.—⁵⁷

Sickliness and morbidity thus reflect a negative attitude to life. Rather than confronting one's weaknesses, the preference of the afflicted is to resort to a justification of one's predicament through an activity that Nietzsche calls 'moralisation' (*Moralisirung*). In *The Genealogy*, moralisation is portrayed as taking a moral interpretation based on the effects of the development of a bad conscience – previously identified as the *intermediate cause* of decadence – so as to live by the mistaken conception that human nature is defective, and that any negative life experiences are ultimately a punishment because one is 'guilty' before God.⁵⁸ Nietzsche later comes to state that "*moralisation* itself is a '*decadence*'", an example of "the *great error* of thinking"⁵⁹ that will be examined next.

4.2.3 The Psychology of Error and *Ressentiment*

The second kind of psychological weakness I will examine is a psychology of error that leads to *ressentiment*. These failings emerge from an instinctive predilection for self-deception (*Selbsttäuschung*⁶⁰ & *Selbstbetrügerei/Selbst-Betrügerei*)⁶¹ that is reflected in humanity's ability to create and abide by a labyrinth of conceptions and explanations that Nietzsche regards as deceptive or even delusional because they falsify reality.⁶² This tendency for self-deception can develop into obscuring the true nature of decadence, as the accompanying states of physical exhaustion and mental feebleness are in turn responsible for the decadent's belief in a misplaced causality as discussed in Chapter 2.4.1. An individual makes the error of identifying the world as the cause of their ills, and suffering as the effect of inhabiting it. Nietzsche argues that the opposite is the case. The cause of the suffering is not due to some external property pertaining to the world; it is really internal to the individual – an underlying physiological condition – that makes them unable to cope

⁵⁷ KSA: 13:14[65] = WP: 47.

⁵⁸ GM: II, 21.

⁵⁹ KSA: 12:5[89] = WLN, p. 122.

⁶⁰ HH: I, 52, D: 329, & KSA: 8:22[52], 12:7[8] = WP: 113 & 13:14[98] = WLN, pp. 251-253/WP: 551.

⁶¹ D: 103, GM: I, 13, A: 20 & KSA: 11:37[12] = WP: 820, 12:9[178] = WP: 95 & 13:26[95].

⁶² EH: Destiny, 7.

with life. The process of decadence then falsifies a normal perspective rendering its consequences to look like its cause. The danger is that if this misconception is not swiftly dispelled, any attempt to fight decadence becomes a confused and inevitably self-defeating: it achieves but the opposite of its goal, which is to say the promotion of decadence.⁶³ Weakness, the real cause, leads to religious systems of belief, within which sinfulness for example, is understood as a possible cause of suffering. As discussed in Chapter 2.4, what takes place is a substitution of cause and effect, a point that Nietzsche reiterates frequently.⁶⁴

The result is a “psychology of error” (*Psychologie des Irrthums*)⁶⁵ – the propensity for producing fictitious causes, effects and entities that form the basis of morality and religion:

Morality and religion can be exhaustively accounted for by the *psychology of error*: in every single case, cause and effect are confused; or truth is confused with the effects of *believing* that something is true; or a state of consciousness is confused with its causes.⁶⁶

Since these “large errors are a consequence of decadence”,⁶⁷ a change of perspective is required to understand that social, religious and moral ideals and values – such as the ‘true world’ of the philosopher, the ‘divine world’ of the priest, and the ‘free world’ of the moral man – are “the psychological blunder” (*der psychologische Fehlgriff*) borne out of “the physiological confusions” (*die physiologischen Verwechslungen*),⁶⁸ and just symptoms of an inherent weakness – an “imaginary psychology” (*imaginäre Psychologie*).⁶⁹ This failing is in sharp contrast to an “intellectual integrity”

⁶³ KSA: 13:17[6] = WP: 44.

⁶⁴ HH: I, 608, TI: Errors, 1 & 6, KSA: 13:15[31] = WP: 41, 13:16[85], 13:16[86], 13:17[1], 13:17[6] = WP: 44 & 13:19[9].

⁶⁵ TI: Errors, 6, KSA: 10:24[9] = WP: 664, 12:7[1] = WLN, pp. 127-129/WP: 472, 665 & 666, 13:16[85], 13:16[86] & 13:16[17].

⁶⁶ TI: Errors, 6. Cf., KSA: 13:16[85] & 13:16[86].

⁶⁷ Die grossen Irrthümer als Folge der décadence. KSA: 13:16[86] = MT.

⁶⁸ KSA: 13:14[168] = WP: 586.

⁶⁹ A: 15. Cf., TI: Errors 4 & 6.

(*intellektuelle[n] Rechtschaffenheit*),⁷⁰ where one views the truth of these ideals and values as empirical and conditional, and constructs methods to test and assess their inherent worth.⁷¹

This predilection for self-deception that forms the basis of the ‘psychology of error’ further evolves into a reactive logic that is indicative of a powerless ‘victim’, where the latter’s behaviour is not internally motivated but only manifests itself in response to a situation or the actions of others. This kind of response is an expression of a psychology of a resentment and revenge against reality and life in general that Nietzsche refers to as *ressentiment*.⁷² *Ressentiment* we are told is “[b]orn from weakness”,⁷³ and is usually directed by the weak against those who are perceived to be stronger than them.⁷⁴ As part of a “sublime self-deception”, the weak construe weakness as a virtue and their self-preservation as an accomplishment, and thereby inadvertently obtain a false feeling of power and a sense of freedom.⁷⁵ The power relationship between the strong and the weak becomes inverted by an imaginary revenge of the latter, who judge the values of the former as ‘evil’ and ‘wrong’ in comparison to the righteousness of their own.

In Nietzsche’s view, one result of this successful inversion of power and values by the weak has been the proliferation of various social movements, such as communism, socialism and anarchism, which have all been motivated by destructive democratic principles resulting in claims for equal rights and justice.⁷⁶ For example, Nietzsche claims that “*the social question* is a consequence of decadence,”⁷⁷ where the former was common parlance for the then nineteenth-century political debate concerning the social problems caused by poverty and general working-class discontent. Nietzsche believes that those with political agendas seeking to address the social question are

⁷⁰ *TJ*: Skirmishes 16, *NCW*: Antipodes, A: 12, *EH*: Wagner, 2 *KSA*: 13:14[109] = *WP*: 460, 13:14[116] = *WP*: 428, 13:14[132], 13:15[25] & *KGB*: III:5[(1888)/#1075] = *SL*, p. 305.

⁷¹ *KSA*: 13:14[109] = *WP*: 460.

⁷² *A*: 24 & *KSA*: 13:11[240] = *WP*: 179.

⁷³ *EH*: Wise, 6.

⁷⁴ *EH*: Wise, 6 & Destiny, 7.

⁷⁵ *GM*: I, 13.

⁷⁶ *TJ*: Skirmishes, 39.

⁷⁷ *KSA*: 13:14[86] = *WLN*, pp. 248-249/*WP*: 43.

merely projecting their own unconscious suffering.⁷⁸ The weak externalise the cause of their ills, and the necessity of this externalisation is itself the sign that they are unaware of the true cause of their suffering. Rationalising their suffering by arguing from the effect, these weak and politicised individuals create a cause of that effect. There is in their mistaken eyes a responsible external object worthy of blame, one on which to focus the release of their inner tensions of resentment in acts of revenge, that also functions as a cathartic element preventing their own demise.⁷⁹ For this reason, Nietzsche draws parallels between socialists and anarchists on the one hand and Christians on the other, with the result that he considers all of them to be decadents.⁸⁰ Moreover, advocates of such socio-political views are truly decadent in Nietzsche's eyes because they are unable to comprehend their own nature. In endeavouring to provide reasons for their supposed quandary and postulate solutions to the social question, these resentful weak decadents have not recognised that their ideals constitute and perpetuate decadence. Socio-political activists' calls for changing the nature of society by offering idealistic moral cures are not only mistaken, he thinks, but are utterly futile. For the proponents of such views have no comprehension of the true physiological basis of their own affliction, nor that of the subjugated masses they seek to save.⁸¹ This erroneous understanding of the cause of decadence means that those who believe that these cures will influence the course of decadence are merely deluding themselves. Once this is understood, passages like following make sense:

The supposed causes of degeneration are its consequences. But the supposed remedies of degeneration are also mere palliatives against some of its effects: the "cured" are merely one type of the degenerates.⁸²

⁷⁸ *TI*: Skirmishes, 34.

⁷⁹ *KSA*: 13:14[29] = *WLN*, pp. 242-244/*WP*: 373.

⁸⁰ *A*: 57 & 58, *TI*: Skirmishes, 37.

⁸¹ *KSA*: 13:14[86] = *WLN*, pp. 248-249/*WP*: 43.

⁸² *KSA*: 13:14[74] = *WP*: 42.

The implementation of such perceived remedies and reforms would at best be an anaesthetic to the debilitating effects of underlying decadence, or probably invoke even greater exhaustion among the members of society and reduce their resistance to it.⁸³

For Nietzsche, the psychology of error and *ressentiment* fundamentally rests on an *inability* to either assess the validity of the prevailing knowledge claims or to make sensible new ones. As we shall see next, Nietzsche claims that this is due to a pervading scepticism among decadents concerning the merits and possibility of making such claims in the first place.

4.3 The Epistemological: Weakness and Scepticism

4.3.1 Scepticism as an Effect of Decadence

In a notebook entry from the spring of 1888 Nietzsche states that “scepticism is a consequence of decadence”.⁸⁴ The major commentators of Nietzsche’s views on scepticism have noted the connection, but in my view they fail to elucidate what he means by this comment.⁸⁵ I will try to remedy this by arguing that for Nietzsche, both ancient and modern varieties of scepticism share two defining characteristics due to the effects of decadence. The first shared characteristic is that the sceptic’s inherent physiological weakness induces the psychological error of devaluing the world (due to its unknowability or perceived imperfections). This then leads to a scepticism with a moral foundation and links it to nihilism. The second shared characteristic is a preference to disengage from life and the world in a variety of ways. Rather than a scepticism that is indicative of strength, held by those willing to suspend judgement in order to try and understand a perplexing world more fully, decadent scepticism is symptomatic of the inherently weak. Sceptical devaluation and disengagement is expressed in two subtly different incarnations of modern scepticism that Nietzsche considers. The first is a form of disorientation – in the absence of objective values doubt arises about ever arriving at the right values, which leads to passivity and indecision. The second is a form of

⁸³ KSA: 13:17[6] = WP: 44.

⁸⁴ KSA: 13:14[86] = WLN, pp. 248-249/WP: 43.

⁸⁵ See Van Tongeren (1999), Bett (2000), Sommer (2006), & Mitcheson (2017). Parush (1976), p. 537, and Conway & Ward (1992) are partial exceptions.

escape from despair: if there are no objective moral values anywhere to be found, and if knowledge of the world generally must remain forever conditional and uncertain, then a kind existential despair instigates the need for another kind of objective certitude pertaining only to an illusory world. However, before I examine these four points – the two characteristics of devaluation and disengagement that both ancient and modern scepticism share, and the manifestation of these two characteristics in two similar modern incarnations of scepticism – I will first clarify what I take to be the most important difference between ancient and modern scepticism.

Very roughly, ancient scepticism was all-encompassing and offered as remedy a comprehensive way of life under-pinned by integral ethical doctrines.⁸⁶ By contrast, following Descartes' sceptical method of doubt as a means to acquire a foundation for indubitable knowledge, modern scepticism evolved into a more abstract problem within the domain of epistemology.⁸⁷ As we shall see, Nietzsche has little interest in the principle epistemological focus of modern scepticism. He avoids framing his analysis of scepticism in purely epistemological terms in order to expose what he sees as the *moral* origins of scepticism and it is to this view that I will now turn.⁸⁸ I will examine Nietzsche's presentation of ancient scepticism in more detail in Chapter 7.2.2 when I analyse Pyrrho as an exemplar of decadence. The primary focus of scepticism in the following discussion will be Nietzsche's conceptions of modern variety.

4.3.2 The Moral Origins of Scepticism and the Association with Nihilism

According to Nietzsche, the first defining characteristic of scepticism due to the effect of decadence is its moral origin and an association with nihilism. He connects the pursuit of knowledge that results in common sceptical stances to a moral interpretation, which in turn leads to a devaluation of the world.⁸⁹ Even for the sceptic, he argues, morality rather than knowledge is the supreme value.⁹⁰ The

⁸⁶ The ethical component does not apply to the epistemologically orientated form of ancient scepticism of the early Academics that is later associated with Descartes.

⁸⁷ Bett (2013).

⁸⁸ KSA: 12:2[161] = WP: 410. Cf., BGE: 6.

⁸⁹ BGE: 6 & KSA: 12:10[150] = WP: 411.

⁹⁰ KSA: 13:14[135] = WP: 461 & 13:14[137] = WP: 401.

sceptics lack a strong physiological constitution⁹¹ and hence the intellectual integrity to assess the value of morality.⁹² For the weakening effect of the process of a physiological-decadence upon the sceptic's instincts results in the judgement that this world is worthless and contemptible in comparison to the possibility of the existence of an ideal 'true world' that will provide a means of escape from the faults of this one.⁹³ For Nietzsche, physiological-decadence also accounts for any disquiet in the face of undecidability. The ancient Greek Pyrrhonists' responded to the latter through a suspension of judgement (*epochē*) with the goal to obtain a state of untroubled existence of tranquillity called *ataraxia*.⁹⁴ Such a judgement is, Nietzsche judges, similar to those who seek an alternative world. For the ethical ideal of *ataraxia* is still a striving by the weak and weary for a form of escape from life that is a condemnation of the world,⁹⁵ and an expression of ancient Greek decadence.⁹⁶ Moreover, assuming one holds that truth matters, if one comes to believe that nothing in this world is true, real, alluring, or worthwhile, then nothing seems to matter anymore. This is a general example of what Nietzsche calls nihilism, which as we saw in in the Chapter 3.3.3, he terms the "logical result"⁹⁷ of the debilitating effects of "physiological-decadence".⁹⁸

While nihilism is predominantly concerned with values – especially those of morality – scepticism doubts that reality can be known. Where scepticism and nihilism meet is in an expression of the unavailability of truth that is associated with the absence of values, which leads to an extreme variety of moral scepticism and expressed as: "nothing is true, everything is permitted".⁹⁹ Nihilism for Nietzsche is primarily a question of moral devaluation¹⁰⁰ and not one of epistemology:

⁹¹ *BGE*: 208.

⁹² *A*: 12.

⁹³ *A*: 10.

⁹⁴ Berry (2013), p. 40.

⁹⁵ See Chapter 7.1.

⁹⁶ *KSA*: 13:14[99] = *WP*: 437. The fact that the distinctive ethical and practical nature of *ataraxia* is not a feature of the scepticism of the early Academics probably explains why the later Nietzsche makes no specific mention of them. Correspondingly, he does make a passing reference to the later Academics, perhaps because of their incorporation of an ethical position into their sceptical beliefs, which he interprets as another example of using scepticism for moral and religious needs, *KSA*: 12:9[3] = *WP*: 101.

⁹⁷ *KSA*: 13:14[86] = *WP*: 43.

⁹⁸ *KSA*: 3:15[10] = *WP*: 851.

⁹⁹ *GM*: III, 24. *Cf.*, *Z*: IV, Shadow.

¹⁰⁰ *KSA*: 12:7[43].

The decisive thing is scepticism towards morality. The collapse of the *moral* interpretation of the world, its *sanction* lost once it has tried to flee into a hereafter: ending up in nihilism, 'Everything is meaningless' (the impracticability of one interpretation of the world – one to which tremendous energies have been dedicated – arouses the suspicion that *all* interpretations of the world might be false).¹⁰¹

For 'weak' decadents, this type of nihilism and its consequences are disturbing. For the possible implications that nothing has value and meaning, are essentially twofold. As Bernard Reginster has argued, nihilism can be seen as a sense of disorientation when one comes to believe that there are no higher values. Or alternatively, as a nihilism of despair when one comes to realize that one's highest values will never be realized. Both disorientation and despair can lead to passivity or even apathy.¹⁰² The moral origins of scepticism then are an expression of the inherent weakness of the proponent, which leads Nietzsche to distinguish it from another kind of scepticism that lacks this foundation – the scepticism of the strong, a comparison we shall examine next.

4.3.3 'Weak' versus 'Strong' Scepticism

In order to expose the moral origins of scepticism, Nietzsche embarks on an evaluative diagnosis. He presents a symptomatological description of an opposition between two types of sceptics. This description distinguishes between their personal attributes as weak and strong types of life.¹⁰³ 'Weak' scepticism is a veiled repudiation of the sceptical denial of truth. By contrast 'strong' scepticism – the type he advocates – is a creative affirmation of this conception of the absence of truth that favours a perspectival orientation instead, one he associates with greatness¹⁰⁴ and intellectual honesty.¹⁰⁵ For Nietzsche, 'strong' scepticism advocates a sense of questioning and

¹⁰¹ KSA: 12:2[127] = *WLN*, pp. 83-84/*WP*: 1.

¹⁰² Reginster (2006), pp. 10-11 & p. 29.

¹⁰³ See Van Tongeren (1999) and Mitcheson (2017). The distinction can probably be traced to the 1883/1884 notebook entry that differentiates between scepticism of weakness and one of courage, and Nietzsche's own revision of scepticism that aims to associate it with heroic feelings, KSA: 10:24[30]. Another slightly later entry talks of "Overcoming the sceptic of weakness." (*Überwindung des Sceptikers der Schwäche.*), KSA: 11:26[241] = *MT*.

¹⁰⁴ A: 54. *Cf.*, KSA: 12:9[197] = *WP*: 380 & 13:11[48], Not included in KSA = *WP*: 963.

¹⁰⁵ KSA: 13:15[28] = *WP*: 414.

challenging of existing beliefs and values, and is among the required tool to assist in unmasking the incarnations of decadence we find around us and combat the prevailing sickness of modernity.

What motivates Nietzsche's views on scepticism? His view of scepticism is framed by the suspicion of traditional conceptions of an eternal 'universal' truth, objectively presenting a 'correct', corresponding portrayal of the world that is wholly independent of our attempts to describe it. Instead, Nietzsche's preferred view rests on the idea that absolute truth from no point of view is unavailable and that the 'truth' is always relative to some perspective, conceptual scheme, and need.¹⁰⁶ He perceives both modern and ancient scepticism as merely a means for self-preservation, which is a major trait of the decadent, because the latter is more concerned with avoiding error than pursuing truth (in Nietzsche's sense).¹⁰⁷ Both of these incarnations of scepticism destroy what he calls the "presuppositions of knowledge", the conditions of possibility and limits of knowledge that are intrinsically related to the interests and perspectives of the human agent.¹⁰⁸ Modern and ancient variants of scepticism undermine the possibility that some part of humanity will be free to think and act for itself, with a will that is truly its own. It is precisely this kind of 'weak' scepticism that he sees as indicative of decadence, an "expression of a certain complex physiological condition which . . . is called weak nerves or a sickly constitution".¹⁰⁹ This disorder – identified as the *immediate cause* of decadence in the previous chapter – leads to an inability to make valuations corresponding to one's ever changing requirements for flourishing in a changing world. Nietzsche is also critical of the second defining characteristic of scepticism due to decadence, which is the need for calm and disengagement from the world.

Since Nietzsche is ultimately concerned with the creation of values, he does not accept a sceptical suspension of judgement of *epochē*, nor the associated decadent ideal of *ataraxia* that are the characteristics of Pyrrhonism. A 'strong' sceptic is one who has surmounted the need for

¹⁰⁶ Bett (2000), pp. 68-69.

¹⁰⁷ *TI*: Socrates, 9, *EH*: D, 2.

¹⁰⁸ *A*: 49.

¹⁰⁹ *BGE*: 208.

absolute ideals. This overcoming includes an ability to detach from everything including the scepticism such that it does not turn into a form of dogmatism. By contrast, the practitioners of life-denying ideals share an absolute faith in absolute value. They devalue the world at hand, they ascetically deny the body, and instead nihilistically value the empty illusion of a 'better' alternative world.

4.3.4 A 'Weak' Scepticism Based on Doubt and Passivity

Nietzsche first introduces his conception of 'weak' scepticism as an effect of decadence in *Beyond Good and Evil*, but only in an implicit fashion as this book pre-dates his usage of decadence.¹¹⁰ There he refers to an unrecognised phenomenon of instinctual weakening prevalent to contemporary Europe – “an age of disintegration” – that he alone has diagnosed.¹¹¹ Nietzsche claims that a herd like instinct for obedience has developed in Europe at the expense of an instinct to command and create. The development of a bad conscience – identified as the *intermediate cause* of decadence in the previous chapter – now affects those few remaining higher individuals who would have otherwise been able to acknowledge their aptitude. Instead of displaying leadership, they now prefer the kind of self-deceptive psychology of error as discussed above. They wrongly accept that commands must originate from an external source such as tradition, law and God.¹¹² This alarming contemporary proclivity to leave the independence of decision-making to others is akin to an illness which Nietzsche specifies as a “paralysis of the will” (*Willenslähmung*).¹¹³

A corresponding notebook entry reiterates and succinctly conveys the physiological basis of the scepticism that Nietzsche sees as a disorder:

NB. Our era is sceptical in its most essential instincts: almost all the subtler scholars and artists are sceptics, even if they don't like to admit it to themselves. Pessimism and *No-saying* is only easier for the mind's indolence: our muggy era with its democratic air is above all indolent.

¹¹⁰ BGE: 208-211.

¹¹¹ BGE: 200.

¹¹² BGE: 199.

¹¹³ BGE: 208.

Where the mind is more particular it says: 'I don't know' and 'I no longer trust myself or anyone else' and 'I no longer know which way to turn', and 'hope – that's an empty phrase for liars or for demagogic orators and artists'. Scepticism is the expression of a certain *physiological* constitution, one inevitably produced in the great crossing of many races: the many inherited valuations struggle with each other, hinder each other's growth. The force which loses most here is the *will*: therefore great fear of responsibility, because no one can vouch for himself. Hiding behind communities is the order of the day, 'you scratch my back and I'll cover yours'. Thus a herd-like species emerges: and anyone with a strong, domineering and audacious will is certain to come to rule in such times.¹¹⁴

Modernity's juggling of multifarious cultural values has resulted in a modern kind of scepticism that Nietzsche construes as an inability to live by any one set of values. To him this in turn is indicative of a kind of weakness of will.¹¹⁵ This weakness is expressed, for example, in the unwillingness of contemporary late-nineteenth century cultural elite to partake in independent decision making. They cannot assert or confirm as a result of their own perspectives, the truth or accuracy of anything. They are so perturbed by conflicting knowledge, diametrically at odds with their idealised sense of moral certitude, that their stance becomes a pessimistic negation of all knowledge – theoretical and practical – which leads them not just to say 'no' but to do 'no' as well. As a result they bind together with the rest of society in choosing to hide behind a mask of collective responsibilities, thus leaving them all potentially at the mercy of a dominant and manipulating leader.¹¹⁶ Nietzsche portrays this kind of scepticism as a type of relativism that is characteristic of his own decadent era. The resulting indecisiveness accounts for the prevailing trend of democratic egalitarianism and parliamentarism.¹¹⁷

¹¹⁴ KSA: 11:34[67] = *WLN*, p. 5.

¹¹⁵ Weakness of will is not to be narrowly understood as cases where an agent's appetites force her to act in ways that simultaneously go against her better judgement. Although those cases form part of what Nietzsche means by weak will, his conception of weakness of will is wider.

¹¹⁶ *BGE*: 208.

¹¹⁷ *TI*: Skirmishes, 38-40.

Let me try to summarize the decadent sceptic stance one more time. When the decadent is confronted with a range of possibilities, he does not know what to believe, what to will, or what to do. Nietzsche imagines the sceptic to reason (emotionally perturbed) as follows: [1] when there are many truths, then nothing is (feels) true *absolutely*. [2] If nothing is (feels) true absolutely, then there are no absolute criteria or values. And yet, [3] absolute criteria or values are required (desired) for proper (good, just, or certain) decisions. It follows (from [1], [2] and [3]) that, [4] he cannot (is too anxious to) make proper decisions. If [5] you cannot (or are too anxious) to make proper decisions, then [6] it is better not to (it is practically impossible to) make any decisions at all. It follows (from [5] and [6]) he should (feels he must) refrain from making any decisions. His scepticism prevents him not only from committing to any action or any specific values, it also prevents him from creating new ones, as any newly created values would also lack the requisite absolute standing.

In *Beyond Good and Evil* Nietzsche parodies such a stance of intentional or affective aversion to decision or action as a tranquilizer or sedative, “the soft, sweet, soothing, poppy flower of skepticism”.¹¹⁸ This is an allusion to ancient scepticism as practised by the Pyrrhonists, who as we briefly saw above, strove to be liberated from disquiet in the face of undecidability and attain peace of mind with the life-denying ideal of *ataraxia*. Nietzsche claims this decadent ideal is also present in the other, recent incarnations of modern scepticism, which is what I will turn to next.

4.3.5 A ‘Weak’ Scepticism Based on Fear and Illusory Hope

In a notebook entry Nietzsche associates the phenomenon of decadence with a list of attributes: tolerance, scepticism, and objectivity. This suggests another, related form of ‘weak’ skepticism.¹¹⁹ For him, the modern preference for scepticism is obscured by a prevailing feigned scientific and objective analysis of the contemporary philosopher. Although Nietzsche does not cite any particular philosophical stance, or names any individual philosophers who possess this mind-set or attitude, using passages from *Beyond Good and Evil*, we can infer that he means Auguste Comte’s positivism,

¹¹⁸ BGE: 208.

¹¹⁹ KSA: 13:15[32].

Herbert Spencer's evolutionary ethics, as well as Schopenhauer's Platonic aesthetic of 'disinterested' knowledge.¹²⁰ For Nietzsche, these examples respectively of "'objectivity,' . . . 'scientificity,' . . . [and] 'pure, will-less knowing'" of ideas, are representative of a prevailing trend for what he calls a "dressed-up skepticism (*aufgeputzte Skepsis*) and paralysis of the will".¹²¹ Scepticism may have changed its appearance, Nietzsche seems to argue, but claims of objectivity are still indicative of those of a weakened will who are sceptical about what constitutes the 'truth'. Instead of this scepticism leading to abstaining from decision and action due to the unavailability of absolute truth as we saw above, it leads to a desperate need, an active demand for certainty. A couple of passages from *The Gay Science* elucidate this point:

*Believers and their need to believe . . . that impetuous demand for certainty that today discharges itself in scientific-positivistic form among great masses – the demand that one wants by all means something to be firm . . . in short, the instinct of weakness . . . Indeed, around all these positivistic systems hover the fumes of a certain pessimistic gloom, something of a weariness, fatalism, disappointment, fear of new disappointment . . . and whatever other symptoms or masquerades there are of the feeling of weakness.*¹²²

From this passage we can infer that the reason for the scientists' demand for certainty is that they also possess a fearful and tacit scepticism that this certainty will surely not be obtained from this world. The resulting disappointment with reality reflects the inherent weakness of those who cannot fully concede and accept that there is no *absolute* truth. These scientists then avoid seeking the difficult empirical truths of reality, and instead aspire for contentment through a scientific kind of objective certitude of an abstract 'world of truth' that can only be discerned by reason. What does this have to do with scepticism? The answer is that for Nietzsche, this stance is another example of the weak striving for the escapism of *ataraxia*:

¹²⁰ BGE: 204 & 208.

¹²¹ BGE: 208.

¹²² GS: 347.

[T]heir inner expectations and wish that things might be *such and such*, their fear and hope, too soon find rest and satisfaction . . . [by] faith in . . . a 'world of truth' that can be grasped entirely with the help of . . . human reason. – What? Do we really want to demote existence in this way . . . [a] reverence for everything that lies beyond your horizon!¹²³

For Nietzsche, modern science and philosophy, in their search for objective knowledge and absolute truth are unlike the reasoning of the pre-Socratic Greeks whom he admired precisely because they possessed a value-creating perspective, and, by his evaluative standard, were not under the spell of decadence in the pejorative sense (DPS).¹²⁴ He views any dogmatic insistence on the value of objectivity as a form of denial of the perspectival nature of knowledge. The modern truth-seeker only wants to be “a mirror” that passively reflects the world in accordance with the values of others, and not as a judge that evaluates those values and ventures to legislate ones of his own.¹²⁵ He follows a principle of the ascetic ideal by effectively refraining from being a person by attempting to externally orientate himself beyond his needs and knowledge of this world. According to Nietzsche, detaching the individual together with their personality, morality, *etc.*, from their perspective, makes the philosophy or science that such a person expounds inimical to life, and so will be the morality and the religion that is upheld with this scepticism. Nietzsche believes that objectivity is not derived from a single external standpoint of disinterested contemplation by a detached observer. Objectivity is only grasped by immersion in, and affective engagement with, the world. Without such perspectival and effective engagement, one dwells in a fictitious rather than a real world. As Nietzsche clearly states in *The Genealogy*, objectivity for him is a function of the variety of opposing perspectives commanded by the interpreter.¹²⁶

The fact the contemporary philosopher primarily seeks a scientific kind of objectivity is a consequence of philosophy's gradual replacement by science as the principal approach and manner

¹²³ GS: 373.

¹²⁴ BGE: 204.

¹²⁵ BGE: 207.

¹²⁶ GM: III, 12.

of enquiry. Yet Nietzsche perceives contemporary science critically as a mixture of Christian-Platonic metaphysical realism, blended with positivism and its claim that knowledge is derived from sensory experience and interpreted through reason and logic. However, these prevailing practices still preserve the Christian-Platonic misconceived objectivist standpoint. Science is seen by those who have faith in it, firstly, as 'discovering' the truth; secondly, as holding that its 'findings' are good in themselves; and thirdly, that science together with a secular morality, such as an evolutionary ethics, will instigate overall progress for mankind.

Combined, these factors entail that the scientist's own comprehension is derived not purely from scientific practices themselves, but instead reflect his moral presuppositions and merely disguises his inherent weakness. This weakness is expressed in the need for a comforting faith that orients and sustains some aspects of these interpretive practices, while dismissing others as unpalatable, for example, when they reflect the true randomness and harshness of the world. Consequently for Nietzsche, the effects of decadence have come to dominate the ideals of philosophy and science.¹²⁷ Modern science retains the notion of absolute truth of the laws of nature as created by God, but this truth is now articulated in terms of scientific laws. In *The Gay Science* – and again in *The Genealogy* where the original passage is repeated – Nietzsche construes the scientific craving for absolute truth as still a faith in truth of the metaphysical kind. Scientific laws make an appeal to an abstraction beyond the physical world to 'another' or 'other world' (*eine andre Welt*)¹²⁸ that is a modern incarnation of the ideal and fictitious 'true world' of metaphysics.¹²⁹

No doubt, those who are truthful in that audacious and ultimate sense which faith in science presupposes *thereby affirm another world* than that of life, nature, and history; and insofar as they affirm this 'other world' must they not by the same token deny its counterpart, this world, *our world*? . . . that it is still a *metaphysical faith* upon which our faith in science rests – that even we knowers of today, we godless anti-metaphysicians, still take *our* fire, too, from the

¹²⁷ *GM*: III, 23, *TI*: Skirmishes & *KSA*: 13:14[40] = *WP*: 53.

¹²⁸ *Z*: Convalescent, 2, *GS*: 344 & 346, *GM*: III, 24, *TI*: Reason, 6, *A*: 24 & *KSA*: 13:14[168] = *WP*: 586.

¹²⁹ *TI*: Reason, 6.

flame lit by the thousand-year old faith, the Christian faith which was also Plato's faith, that God is truth; that truth is divine . . .¹³⁰

The scientist, under the disguise of scientific objectivity, rejects the values of those who locate themselves firmly in this world of 'life, nature, and history' in favour of 'another' abstract world. Nietzsche therefore perceives modern science – its 'dressed-up scepticism' – as erected on moral grounds, as fundamentally a nihilistic enterprise in that it devalues reality in favour of an imaginary certitude.¹³¹

In Nietzsche's view, the effect of decadence expressed in modern scepticism is represented by the two sides of a counterfeit coin of truth that he will not accept. On the one side are those who sceptically abstain from seeking the truth. They doubt that 'truth' is an attainable goal and it is this sceptical attitude that results in their indecision and further weakness. And on the other side there are those who fear the unavailability of truth. They doubt that 'truth' can ever be found in this world, which leads them to the unconditional pursuit of trying to find 'truth' and solace in an 'other world'. It is to those metaphysical fictions that I will now turn.

4.4 The Metaphysical: Weakness and Idealism

4.4.1 Decadence and Humanity's 'Metaphysical Need'

For Nietzsche, the decadent's inability or unwillingness to change his attitude to truth and knowledge as discussed in the previous section has enormous ramifications. This is particular so when a sceptical attitude gets combined with the idea that an alternative 'true world' may exist. The prospect of the latter can be used to address humanity's "metaphysical need" (*metaphysische Bedürfniss*)¹³² – a drive to seek existence's ultimate meaning or purpose since the presumption of a 'true world' offers the possibility of a superior existence that is far removed from the meaningless

¹³⁰ GS: 344. Cf., GM: III, 24.

¹³¹ GS: 346 & BT: Self-Criticism, 1.

¹³² HH: I, 26, 37 & 151, GS: 151, EH: HH, 6 & KSA: 8:22[107], 9:6[290] & KGB: I:2[(1866)/#500] = SL, p. 12. Nietzsche takes the phrase from Schopenhauer, (1958), II, XVII.

suffering of a finite existence.¹³³ The weak accordingly resort to the pretence of a fictitious ‘true world’ that allows the attainment of a set of imaginary ideals, as discussed in Nietzsche’s anti-reality formula in Chapter 1.3.3. Explicit within this formula is Nietzsche’s claim that it is suffering from reality that motivates the decadent’s metaphysical thinking:

[T]hat whole fictitious world is rooted in a *hatred* of the natural (– of reality! –), it is the expression of a profound sense of unease concerning reality . . . *But this explains everything*. Who are the only people motivated to *lie their way out of* reality? People who *suffer* from it. But to suffer from reality means that you are a piece of reality that has *gone wrong* . . .¹³⁴

For Nietzsche a belief in the existence of a ‘true world’ is one of the most significant factors in the encroachment of decadence in late modernity. He depicts belief in a ‘true world’ as merely a ‘fable’ in a famous summary of six-stages – “The history of an error”.¹³⁵ Just as the nobles who are instinctively well-constituted embrace the world for what it is and are thereby “justified by their reality”, the ill-constituted decadents involuntarily resort to abstract distinctions between truth and appearance.¹³⁶

In order to distinguish without confusion between what is real and what is imaginary, Nietzsche by contrast mandates the abolition of the distinction between truth and appearance.¹³⁷ For he argues that this abolition might then lead to a belief in the real world, and in so doing expose the expressions of decadence that reside at the various stages of Western metaphysics.¹³⁸ Using my terminology, his aspiration is to reveal that to adhere to such a distinction is a prime example of psychological-decadence: it is the basis for a rejection of this life for another one in an ersatz world,

¹³³ Nietzsche utilises the principle of confusion of cause and effect as discussed in Chapter 2.4.1, to claim that this metaphysical need is not the source of religion as might be assumed, but rather the after-effect of its waning influence: “The ‘metaphysical need’ is the result not the origin.”, (*Das „metaphysisches Bedürfnis“ ist das Resultat nicht Ursprung.*), KSA: 9:6[290] = MT, & “The metaphysical need is not the origin of religion, as Schopenhauer has it, but only a *late offshoot* of it.”, GS: 151.

¹³⁴ A: 15. Cf., A: 30.

¹³⁵ TI: Fable.

¹³⁶ TI: Skirmishes, 32.

¹³⁷ TI: Improvers, 1.

¹³⁸ TI: Fable.

indicative of the underlying debilitating physiological condition that results in what Nietzsche calls 'declining life' (*niedergehenden Lebens*).¹³⁹ Belief in this contrast between a true and an apparent world is only necessary for the weak, as they are psychologically incapable of relinquishing their dependence upon it.¹⁴⁰ What is called the 'true world' is in fact an invented domain. What is slanderously called the 'merely-apparent world' is in fact the real one. This deeply entrenched perspective has led to the development of a plethora of erroneous responses as to what to value in the promotion of life:

The 'true world' and the 'world of appearances' – in plain language, the *made-up* world and reality . . . So far, the *lie* of the ideal has been the curse on reality, it has made humanity false and hypocritical down to its deepest instincts – to the point of worshipping values that are the *reverse* of those that might begin to guarantee it prosperity, a future, a high *right* to a future.¹⁴¹

Nietzsche's depiction here of the hitherto acceptance of a falsehood and what may be gained by rejecting it, is indicative of his conception of differing degrees of decadence and opposing ways of dealing with its inevitability. Any belief in conceptually distinct and mutually exclusive domains such as either absolute truth or sceptical claims the world as one of mere appearance, are symptomatic of entrenched physiological-decadence. Recall that according to Nietzsche's abductive reasoning as discussed in Chapter 2, such viewpoints reveal the level of physiological disarray and associated "psychological needs" (*psychologischen Bedürfnissen*) of their adherents.¹⁴²

Different types of decadents will display a different attitude to their metaphysical need. 'Active' decadents as discussed in Chapter 3.3.3 will resist. This is because in Jacqueline Scott's terminology they are strong enough to battle their wayward instincts, and possess the intellectual

¹³⁹ *TI*: Reason, 6 & Skirmishes, 37, *CW*: Epilogue & *NCW*: Antipodes.

¹⁴⁰ *TI*: Reason, 6.

¹⁴¹ *EH*: Preface, 2. *Cf.*, *Destiny*, 6 & 8, *A*: 56 & *TI*: Errors, 6.

¹⁴² *KSA*: 13:11[99] = *WLN*, pp. 217-219/*WP*: 12.

integrity to question the worth of values by understanding the role the latter play in their lives.¹⁴³ ‘Passive’ decadents, however, will not resist as they are too weak and lack the required physical and intellectual integrity. They give in to their decadent instincts by creating or accepting values that satisfy their instinctual needs for stability, certainty and tranquillity. Their values betray their world-weariness and resignation that negates life, leading to an estrangement from reality.¹⁴⁴ ‘Passive’ decadents are projecting their weakness onto the world by inventing or believing in an ideal of unchanging being, because they are unable to accept and stomach reality for what it is – an actuality (*Wirklichkeit*)¹⁴⁵ that is changing and challenging rather than permanent and stable.¹⁴⁶

Nietzsche challenges the worth for the rest of humanity of these escapist decadent values that are rooted in subjective experiences. For example, he claims that Jesus “accepted only *inner* realities as realities, as ‘truths’,”¹⁴⁷ and that prevailing values of religious and moral judgements are merely inverted ones due to the influence of priests and other theologians: “whatever hurts life the most is called ‘true’, and whatever improves, increases, affirms, justifies life or makes it triumph is called ‘false’.”¹⁴⁸ Especially the priests are so wrapped up in the fictitious world of their own making that either they fall for their own inventions, or, as they ‘know’ the ‘truth’, they become hostile to rational or scientific reassessments of their beliefs:

If you have a holy task like improving, saving, or redeeming mankind, if you carry God in your bosom and serve as the mouthpiece for imperatives issuing from the beyond, then this sort of a mission already puts you outside any merely rational assessment, – you are sanctified by a task like this, you are a type belonging to a higher order of things! . . . Why should a priest care

¹⁴³ Scott (1998), pp. 63-65.

¹⁴⁴ *EH*: Destiny, 5.

¹⁴⁵ *EH*: Destiny, 7.

¹⁴⁶ *KSA*: 13:18[13] = *WP*: 538 & 12:7[54] = *WLN*, pp. 138-139/*WP*: 617.

¹⁴⁷ *A*: 34.

¹⁴⁸ *A*: 9.

about *science*? He is above all that! – and so far, priests have been in *control*! They have *determined* the concepts 'true' and 'untrue'! . . .¹⁴⁹

4.4.2 The Rejection of Reality and the Embracing of Ideals

As a consequence of their weakness then, decadents satisfy their 'metaphysical need' by falsifying the world. They invent explanations that have no basis in reality, but are instead rooted in abstract ideals. It is as such that they deprive reality of its value, meaning and truthfulness.¹⁵⁰ As we saw when discussing the anti-reality formula in Chapter 1.3.3, Nietzsche uses the blanket term of 'idealism' to convey this predilection.¹⁵¹ In according their 'idealist' fabrications the highest value, decadents devalue the world revealing their resentment and hostility to life in general. When Nietzsche refers to "inspired by weakness" (*unter der Inspiration der Schwäche*)¹⁵² as quoted above, this is one interpretation of what he means.¹⁵³ Thus, Nietzsche calls Plato "a coward in the face of reality", who "escapes into the ideal".¹⁵⁴ Their metaphysical remedial prescriptions for the weak provide the theoretical assurances that underpin the values of morality and religion in general. This is especially so for a specific practice of self-abnegation that Nietzsche calls 'unselfing' (*Entselbstung*),¹⁵⁵ or 'the morality of unselfing' (*Entselbstungs-Moral*¹⁵⁶/*Moral der Entselbstung*¹⁵⁷).

For Nietzsche the true test of the health of a human being in general, and one aspiring to greatness in particular, is the acceptance of the reality of this world just for what it is, despite its inherently brutal and distressing amoral immanence. But as is so often the case with Nietzsche's usage of terminology that is central to his philosophy, he provides no definition of the term 'reality' (*Realität*), although its usage increases dramatically in his final works in conjunction with his use of

¹⁴⁹ A: 12.

¹⁵⁰ EH: Preface, 2. Literally: 'under the inspiration of weakness'.

¹⁵¹ EH: BT, 2. Cf., GM: III, 19. EH: Books, 6, & TI: Ancients, 2.

¹⁵² EH: BT, 2.

¹⁵³ A second, yet compatible interpretation is discussed in Chapter 4.6.

¹⁵⁴ TI: Ancients, 2.

¹⁵⁵ A: 54. Cf., BGE: 207, GM: III, 11 & 17 & CW: Epilogue.

¹⁵⁶ EH: D, 2, Destiny, 7, "morality of self-negation", or "morality of depersonalization", KSA: 12:10[128] = WLN, pp. 196-197/WP: 388, 13:12[1] & 13:23[3].

¹⁵⁷ "[M]orality of self-abnegation", A: 54, KSA: 13:11[48] & 13:16[14].

the term 'decadence'.¹⁵⁸ Moreover, he avoids any association of his thought with a philosophical school or position associated with the opposite of idealism, that of common sense 'realism' (*Realismus*).¹⁵⁹ He does use the term 'a bold realism' (*einen verwegenen Realismus*) however, to describe the bounding enthusiasm to understand all facets of the world of his favourite non-decadent, Goethe.¹⁶⁰

The decadent's first idealist contrivance is the rejection of reality. It rests on the assertion that this actual world we currently inhabit is not the real or most important one, but rather an inferior version of a 'true world' that lies beyond it. The second idealist contrivance is the introduction of the ideal of *immortality* via the establishment of a disembodied yet eternal soul.¹⁶¹ This eternal soul's dual function is to facilitate the hope of a future and better life in the 'true world' without their weak and exhausted bodies, which also provides the means to condemn nobles whose physical prowess is the basis for their unjust claims that they are not their equal.¹⁶² The third idealist contrivance is the postulation of *free will*. This enables the decadents to blame the nobles for their 'evil' and discriminatory acts, whilst extolling their own weakness and asceticism as virtuous and 'good', and therefore meriting the reward of eternal inviolability.¹⁶³ The fourth idealist contrivance is the creation of an omnipotent, omniscient and benevolent supernatural being in the form of a one and only *God*, with the power and ability to judge all before him and enforce appropriate sanctions, thereby ensuring that the nobles' behaviour can be censured and the decadents' commended. In this way the virtue of the decadents will ultimately be exalted, replacing that of their previous superiors, the nobles.¹⁶⁴ These four contrivances of idealism – a 'true world', immortality, free will, and God – are the kind of lies that decadents use for their preservation as mentioned above in the

¹⁵⁸ 1888: *TI* (9), *CW* (0), *A* (18), *EH* (16) versus 1886: *BGE* (2) & 1887: *GM* (3). *Nachlass*: 1887 (36), 1888 (29) versus 1886 (5).

¹⁵⁹ *GM*: III, 18, *GM*: III, 24 & *KSA*: 13:15[29] = *WP*: 268.

¹⁶⁰ *TI*: Skirmishes, 50.

¹⁶¹ *A*: 43.

¹⁶² *A*: 21.

¹⁶³ *TI*: Errors, 7.

¹⁶⁴ *A*: 44.

passage from *Ecce Homo* that I used to introduce the most profound effects of decadence.¹⁶⁵ And yet, the unintended and detrimental consequences of this idealism are significant in Nietzsche's eyes.

The first unintended consequence of decadence idealism is that the experience of a bad conscience as instilled by the dictates of civilized society is further exacerbated by the conception of free will. Free will allows the decadents to not only blame the nobles, but also themselves for they have no choice but to take responsibility for possessing – and then at times indulging in – their 'sinful' instincts. This intensifies their suffering through increasing the turmoil of their physiological-decadence. Accordingly, the decadents suffer by suppressing their natural inclinations in potentially in several ways; from fear of divine retribution, and from their own sense of guilt due to their perceived self-culpability. In both cases they believe their errant ways could have been eschewed if only in their actions they had adhered to the proscribed morality.¹⁶⁶

The second unintended consequence of decadence idealism is the propagation of nihilism. This follows from the belief that if the 'true world' is what really 'exists' and this actual world is just a precursory spectre, then it follows that the latter is actually at worst valueless and meaningless, or at best merely redeemable by virtue of simply being a contributing factor in attaining the 'true world'. Adherents to such a view, according to Nietzsche, are then in danger of being consumed by a variant of nihilism – given their commitments, they are powerless to establish any positive purpose for their life that, ultimately, has no value or meaning.¹⁶⁷

For Nietzsche, both of these unintended consequences demonstrate not only the failure of idealism to liberate the weak from their perceived predicament; they also highlight the failure of the weak to resist false remedies to their psychological feebleness. Furthermore, such weakened

¹⁶⁵ Cf., KSA: 13:11[415] = WP: 853.

¹⁶⁶ GM: III, 16.

¹⁶⁷ KSA, 13:11[99] = WLN, pp. 217-219/WP: 12.

humanity intensifies their decadence by adopting “the ideal of *slandering the world*”,¹⁶⁸ worshipping values that are detrimental to their flourishing.¹⁶⁹ The outcome is the instigation of a self-perpetuating vicious circle of decadence that leads to ever increasing decadence. I shall come back to this below.

4.5 Restricted Agency: Weakness Not Freedom

4.5.1 Freedom as Autonomous Agency

The manifestations of psychological weakness that have been discussed so far combine to produce what I believe Nietzsche sees as the defining and most pernicious effect of decadence. This is that decadence inhibits the ability of an individual to will freely – to determine their own actions – although as we shall see shortly, this is not the same as the traditional conception of free will, a conception Nietzsche rejects.¹⁷⁰ Nietzsche’s assessment is based on the following two premises. First, Nietzsche explains decadence in terms of a lack of will to power as discussed in the previous chapter. Second, Nietzsche declares that his conception of will to power is his preferred term for what he calls “that very *instinct for freedom*”.¹⁷¹ Together these two premises suggest that ‘power’ is used here as a synonym for ‘freedom’, such that we can conclude that a lack of will to power must then be synonymous with a lack of freedom. In the *Ecce Homo* passage cited in the introduction, Nietzsche claims that decadents “are not free to know”, that their choice of beliefs is inhibited in some sense that will shortly be discussed.¹⁷² Before we discuss this in more detail, we need to know more about Nietzsche’s conception of ‘freedom’. I will argue that Nietzschean ‘freedom’ is best understood as autonomous or agency. I will then show in which sense the decadent is unfree in his eyes.

¹⁶⁸ *EH*: Destiny, 6. *Cf.*, *A*: 24, *CW*: Postscript, 2.

¹⁶⁹ *EH*: Preface, 2.

¹⁷⁰ See Dudley (2002), Chapter 6, who makes a distinction between the unfreedom of a ‘disgregated will’, and the incomplete freedom of a ‘moral will’, despite Nietzsche implying that such wills are not necessarily distinct: “disintegration of the will (*eine Disgregation des Willens*); example: one whole type of morality, the altruistic one which talks much of pity”, *KSA*: 13:17[6] = *WP*: 44. *Cf.*, *TI*: Skirmishes, 35.

¹⁷¹ *GM*: II, 18.

¹⁷² *EH*: BT, 2.

One can interpret Nietzsche's will to power principle as an attempt to side-step the debate concerning free will versus determinism. The meaning of freedom has been characterized by Ken Gemes as a requiring a distinction between *deserts* and *agency* free will.¹⁷³ *Deserts* free will is concerned with whether an individual could have acted otherwise, and where apportioning blame and punishment, or praise and reward are seen as crucial. *Agency* free will is Nietzsche's attempt to mark the contrast between freedom and unfreedom by distinguishing action from a mere doing. This shifts the focus to the question of autonomy, away from the Frankfurtian principle of alternate possibilities, which holds that agent can only be held morally responsible for his actions if he could have acted otherwise. Freedom as autonomy is now perceived as consisting of two requirements: first, that the intentions, beliefs and values *etc.*, which we express in our actions, can be considered our own, and secondly, that we, at least at times, consciously engage in critical reflection of our current self-understanding. Nietzsche thus states: "what is freedom anyway? Having the will to be responsible for yourself",¹⁷⁴ because for him this is "[h]ow to become what you are".¹⁷⁵

Ken Gemes¹⁷⁶ and a number of recent commentators that include Peter Poellner¹⁷⁷ and Brian Leiter¹⁷⁸ believe that Nietzsche often associates the language of freedom with certain kinds of persons. However, the focus of their discussions is on the kind of person that is taken to represent Nietzsche's aspiring ideal – the higher types, the free spirit or sovereign individual – rather than the opposite, the unfree decadent. I will argue that the decadent is an important case in point for Nietzsche's view that freedom is not something individuals are unconditionally endowed with. He believes the consequences of such a view are erroneous notions of responsibility, rights to inflict punishment, and a misplaced yet debilitating sense of guilt.¹⁷⁹ Rather for Nietzsche freedom is only

¹⁷³ Gemes (2009), p. 33.

¹⁷⁴ *TI*: Skirmishes, 38.

¹⁷⁵ *EH*: Subtitle. *Cf.*, *GS*: 270.

¹⁷⁶ When Gemes (2009), p. 34, says that: "Nietzsche is constantly blaming people (Socrates, Jesus, St Paul, Wagner), and often praising others (Napoleon, Beethoven, Goethe, Wagner, Nietzsche)", he does not identify that the former are all decadents according to Nietzsche, and the first three of the latter are antipodes. Nietzsche's opinion of the status of himself and Wagner changes over time.

¹⁷⁷ Poellner (2009).

¹⁷⁸ Leiter (2011).

¹⁷⁹ *TI*: Errors, 7.

attained through one's own actions,¹⁸⁰ an achievement by the strong, by way of overcoming resistances.¹⁸¹ This overcoming entails self-discipline against a backdrop of potential conflict, in order to forge one's own will.¹⁸² Freedom in his sense is the product of a strong will, and failure to attain it is the consequence of a weak will.¹⁸³ At this point it necessary to return briefly that what Nietzsche means by 'will'?

4.5.2 Willing and Freedom

The word 'will' is for Nietzsche one of the prime examples of language metaphysics,¹⁸⁴ for it does not, he thinks, correspond to anything found in reality,¹⁸⁵ it has no metaphysical essence, some ultimately power of *causa sui* [cause of itself].¹⁸⁶ Rather 'will' denotes the self-conscious experience of power an individual attributes himself as agent. It is, Nietzsche argues, a combination of feelings, thought, and "the affect of the command".¹⁸⁷ We could call it a particular mode of expression of Nietzsche's conception of will to power where an individual experiences his powers as his own.¹⁸⁸ It is this affect that is traditionally misconstrued as an independent faculty of 'will':

[T]he one who wills believes with a reasonable degree of certainty that will and action are somehow one; he attributes the success, the performance of the willing to the will itself, and consequently enjoys an increase in the feeling of power that accompanies all success. "Freedom of the will" – that is the word for the multi-faceted state of pleasure of one who commands and, at the same time, identifies himself with the accomplished act of willing.¹⁸⁹

So, according to Nietzsche, although the desire to be an agent motivates an act, one only becomes an agent and attains a unified will by actualizing the desire to the degree that it has power in

¹⁸⁰ *RWB*: 11.

¹⁸¹ Another commentator, Dries (2015), discusses the issue of freedom as autonomous, effective agency at great length but fails to mention decadence even once.

¹⁸² *TI*: Skirmishes, 38.

¹⁸³ *KSA*: 13:14[102] = *WP*: 45 & 13:14[219] = *WLN*, p. 266/*WP*: 46.

¹⁸⁴ *BGE*: 19.

¹⁸⁵ *KSA*: 11:27[1] & 13:11[73] = *WLN*, pp. 212-213/*WP*: 715.

¹⁸⁶ *BGE*: 21.

¹⁸⁷ *BGE*: 19.

¹⁸⁸ *BGE*: 21.

¹⁸⁹ *BGE*: 19.

practice. Conversely an unfree will is the affect of being commanded – or put another way – coerced:

One thus understands 'unfree will' as meaning 'a will coerced by an *alien* will', as if the assertion were: 'Everything you do, you do under coercion by somebody else's will'. Obedience to one's own will is not called coercion, for there is pleasure in it. *That you command yourself*, that is 'freedom of will'¹⁹⁰

The decadent of modernity – for example a religious person who believes that God is responsible for some or all of their actions¹⁹¹ – is determined by a will constructed and imposed externally that Nietzsche generally refers to as either an “unfree will” (*unfreie Wille*)¹⁹² or an “alien will” (*fremden Willen*).¹⁹³ However, I will call this the case of ‘imposed willing’. By contrast, the decadent with an acutely disgregated will¹⁹⁴ – such as the Athenian in crisis prior to Socrates’ intervention – is so weak willed as to be effectively without any detectable experience of will. This kind of decadent has only the so-called freedom of his anarchical drives and instincts, having dispensed with the sustaining influences of long established custom and lacking the ability to organize himself without it. I will call this the case of ‘not willing’, and I will examine this case first.

4.5.3 Unfree Due to ‘Not Willing’: Merely Reactive Behaviour

The decadent is the degenerative obverse of the well-constituted and healthy person whom Nietzsche refers to as the noble as outlined above Chapters 1.4.1 and 2.2.¹⁹⁵ The noble embraces the world including all its perceived imperfections, and is on what Nietzsche terms an ascending course

¹⁹⁰ KSA: 12:1[44] = *WLN*, p. 57.

¹⁹¹ KSA: 13:14[127] = *WP*: 137.

¹⁹² *GS*: 380, KSA: 11:27[14], 12:1[44] = *WLN*, p. 57, 13:11[228] = *WP*: 1020, 13:14[115] = *WP*: 428 & 13:14[125] = *WP*: 136. Also, “unfreedom of the will” (*Unfreiheit des Willens*), *WS*: 61, *GS*: 99, “un-freedom”, *BGE*: 21, “lack of freedom of the will”, *GM*: II, 4, “the will in bondage”, *GM*: II, 21 & KSA: 8:23[88], 9:6[187], 9:6[409], 9:15[12], 10:3[1], 10:7[23], 10:7[216], 11:27[1], 11:41[2] & 12:1[44].

¹⁹³ KSA: 12:1[44] = *WLN*, p. 57, 10:7[224], “the will of another”, *HH*: I, 139 & 140, KSA: 13:14[113] = *WP*: 334 & “external will” 13:14[125] = *WP*: 136.

¹⁹⁴ KSA: 13:14[219] = *WLN*, p. 266/*WP*: 46.

¹⁹⁵ *BGE*: 257, 260 & 261, *GM*: I, 10 & 11 & II, 23. *Cf.*, *TI*: Socrates 7 & 8 & A: 51, 56 & 57.

with life, since his happiness and instinct are aligned.¹⁹⁶ As we saw in Chapter 3.2.2, Nietzsche's explanation for the decadent's declining life is that he suffers from a disgregated will. The decadent therefore lacks the means to amalgamate his anarchic drives and instincts into a coherent whole, and consequently their articulation is not organized for any definitive purpose or goal. Since for Nietzsche to be a self and to have a unified will requires, at least at times, being a coherent whole which gives purpose to its component parts, the decadent is by comparison an artificial whole that lacks intrinsic organizing force. Within him, the constituent anarchic drives and instincts predominate, such that strictly speaking he is not even fully a self. As a consequence the decadent is only capable of acting and thinking in reaction to external stimuli rather than scrutinizing and utilizing some and rejecting others. He is not capable of the kind of genuine action that is required for self-realization and self-determination.¹⁹⁷ Since Nietzsche correlates freedom with "[h]aving the will to be responsible for yourself", which is to say someone capable of discernment, initiative and the ability to select for themselves, according to him the decadent lacks true agency.¹⁹⁸ The decadent is described merely as an exemplar of a reactive lack of freedom, which Nietzsche compares to a reagent that simply provokes a chemical reaction. Alternatively he portrays the decadent as the kind of person who merely reacts by affirming or denying what others have said but does "not think for themselves", such as an unimaginative and pedantic scholar.¹⁹⁹

Nietzsche depicts the difference between nobles and decadents as one between strength and weakness, particularly in terms of opposing wills. The resolve of the nobles is displayed in their ability to defer a response due to their strong will that instinctively orders the drives under a single predominant or master drive. In contrast, the impulsive decadents react immediately to external

¹⁹⁶ *TI*: Socrates, 11. For Nietzsche, even the noble must aspire to obtaining a tragic perspective on life which will in turn ensure securing a 'great health'. This is the only way to be truly free and become a Dionysian in Nietzsche's terminology that is not relevant to the present discussion. See, *GS*: 382, *EH*: BT, 2 & Z, 2.

¹⁹⁷ *EH*: Wise, 3.

¹⁹⁸ *TI*: Skirmishes, 38.

¹⁹⁹ *EH*: Clever, 8.

stimuli.²⁰⁰ Decadents tend to choose what is pernicious and detrimental to their flourishing:²⁰¹ “The weak harm themselves.— That is the type of decadence.”²⁰²

Decadents then inevitably suffer twofold: from their own drives and instincts which they are incapable of regulating, and from being aggrieved by the nobles’ instinctive happiness and disregard to their predicament. Conversely the nobles are strong because they are able to guide and take pleasure from their drives and instincts and direct them, so they suffer less than decadents. Moreover, when they do suffer, the nobles are able to endure it. All things considered, they accept suffering as a necessary condition of living a life that is ultimately worthwhile.²⁰³

4.5.4 Unfree Due to an ‘Imposed Willing’: The Morality of Selflessness

Nietzsche believes that the first case, what I termed ‘not willing’, is far from sustainable for any individual to endure:

*That the ascetic ideal has meant so much to man reveals a basic fact of human will, its horror vacui [fear of emptiness]; it needs an aim —, and it prefers to will nothingness rather than not will.*²⁰⁴

We can infer from what Nietzsche says that in the case of ‘not willing’, the anarchic instinctual turmoil entails that an individual merely reacts to stimuli, self-constituting practices and purposeful actions fail to emerge. Recall from the discussion in Chapter 3.3.3 that this inner chaos together with a bad conscience, are attributes ascribed to what Nietzsche calls an ‘unruly’ decadent.²⁰⁵ So, although Nietzsche never says it exactly, we can infer that an ‘unruly’ decadent is someone who effectively lacks will. This ‘unruly’ type with an acutely disintegrated will and hence ‘no will’ to speak of, can also be looked upon as a *transitory* state of decadence for many people, as no substantive and meaningful psychological expression of their underlying physiological-decadence has yet

²⁰⁰ GM: I, 10, EH: Wise, 2, TI: Errors, 2, CW: 5 & KSA: 13:17[6] = WP: 44.

²⁰¹ TI: Skirmishes, 35 & A: 6.

²⁰² KSA: 13:14[102] = WP: 45.

²⁰³ See Janaway (2017).

²⁰⁴ GM: III, 1, Cf., EH: GM.

²⁰⁵ KSA: 13:15[88].

emerged. By contrast, the majority of individuals still ultimately strive to endow their life and world with some sort of meaning. This occurs even, if in the process, they fail to fully relate to this world and possibly even negate it and their own life. However, their desperation leaves them at the mercy of the insidious power of interpretative delusions provided by others, which is to say an imposed form of willing.

Two factors, bad conscience and nihilism, coalesce to see the emergence and acceptance of “the morality of unselfing” which according to Nietzsche, “demonstrates a will to the end, it *negates* life at the most basic level.”²⁰⁶ This ‘morality of selflessness’, as it is often referred to in the secondary literature, is usefully defined by Christopher Janaway in the following way:

[T]he morality that has arisen from the Judaeo-Christian tradition, whose values, according to Nietzsche, give priority to selflessness, holding it good to be compassionate and self-sacrificing, to suppress one’s natural self, to feel guilt about one’s instincts, and to value a projected ‘higher world’ of absolute value of which one’s imperfect human nature is unworthy.²⁰⁷

What I call ‘imposed willing’, then, is a practice that embraces the guiding principle of the morality of selflessness, where the latter has three intended *purposes* that are meant to address the principal effect of physiological-decadence – suffering due to weakness – and I will examine each in turn.

The first purpose, which Nietzsche considers to be an act of regression, is that the morality of selflessness aims to eradicate or at least diminish suffering. This aspiration has two aspects. One aspiration is clearly a solution designed with perpetuity in mind, for it is aimed at ultimately ensuring an eternal existence in the ‘true world’ devoid of suffering. The other aspiration is more expedient, as it seeks to ease this terrestrial life by alleviating the suffering of those who are too weak to organise their instincts, such as the ‘unruly’ kind of decadent. Adherents of the morality of

²⁰⁶ *EH*, *Destiny*, 7. Cf., *EH*: D, 2.

²⁰⁷ Janaway (2007), pp. 2-3.

selflessness are directed to take one of two alternative courses of action. They can either attempt the total eradication of those natural instincts that are the cause of suffering or are considered 'sinful'. This Nietzsche portrays as analogous to a dentist who cures toothache by pulling teeth.²⁰⁸ Or alternatively they can foster complete resistance to those instincts that cannot be, or should be, properly controlled according to the demands of civil society. This forbearance itself can be accomplished in a number of ways, all of which are for Nietzsche acts of selflessness.²⁰⁹ One possibility is repressing certain instincts in favour of others, such as the subjection of oneself to reason for instance, and the association of this with happiness and virtue as is the case with Socratic morality. However, in Nietzsche's view using reason to contribute to a unity of self may appear to be better than one of anarchic instincts, but such an individual is in fact still ruled by something other than themselves. All this accomplishes is to mask the fact that his instincts are degenerate and not sufficiently self-organized.²¹⁰ However, the principal method of restraint is a more general form of the self-subjection of all of the wayward instincts. This is achieved by way of asceticism and the association of virtue and selfless yet socially admired, altruistic behaviour, such as displaying a lack of egoism or acts of self-sacrifice and self-abnegation. Nietzsche views this as society's and the priests' attempts "to 'improve' humanity" by using the morality of selflessness to tame and domesticate its adherents via observance of the ascetic ideal.²¹¹

The second purpose of the morality of selflessness is to give meaning to the suffering that cannot be eliminated. This is accomplished by interpreting suffering in one of two contrasting ways; as either acquiring virtue, or as a failure to do so which deserves punishment. Both scenarios increase one's prospects of attaining the 'true world' where there is no suffering.²¹² In a similar way one can also be virtuous by acting altruistically out of care for others more than oneself as expressed in the Christian virtues of pity and love of one's neighbour. In Nietzsche's view, such virtues merely

²⁰⁸ *TI*: Morality, 1.

²⁰⁹ *BGE*: 260, *GM*: II, 18, *EH*: Wise, 2 & 8; *HH*, 4 & D, 2 & *NCW*: Antipodes.

²¹⁰ *BT*: Self-Criticism, 1. *Cf.*, *TI*: Socrates, 10.

²¹¹ *EH*: UM, 2. *Cf.*, *TI*: Improvers, 2, *CW*: Wagner, 6 & *EH*: Preface, 2.

²¹² *GM*: III, 28.

overwhelm one's own positive instincts by developing 'selfless' actions or drives.²¹³ Alternatively, meaning is ascribed to your suffering as it is interpreted as punishment justly inflicted on you for your sins, or lack of virtue.²¹⁴

A chain of discernible dependency and mutual reinforcement thus emerges. The first purpose, to eradicate or diminish suffering through denying one's instincts or out of concern for others, is dependent on the second purpose, to give meaning to suffering, which in turn presupposes a positive conception of asceticism. Suffering incurred from asceticism, for example, from forcing oneself to live virtuously in this world, is meaningful by way of being recompensed in the 'true world'. Both these objectives in turn presuppose belief in the four theoretical contrivances of idealism discussed above. Attaining your just deserts rests on the beliefs that, [1] one has free will in virtue of which one can be [2] judged by God to be deserving of a place for your [3] immortal soul in [4] some 'true world'.

The third purpose of the morality of selflessness is to put suffering beyond questioning.²¹⁵ This is to be achieved by strengthening the belief (or faith, both *Glaube* in German), in the theoretical foundations of idealism out of which the morality of selflessness emerges. Moreover, idealism and morality must mutually reinforce each other. This is because the latter is often a product of the former's falsehoods, so it too is threatened by counter knowledge claims. Therefore, the morality of selflessness must aid in reinforcing its parental dogma of idealism by making it taboo to question its reasoning or doubt its truth. The reliance on the convictions contained in this basis of idealism is preserved by an overt policy designed to extinguish people's ability and propensity to deliberate and question, and seek alternative explanations less remove from reality. This is why in Nietzsche's view "science is the taboo of all taboos, – it is the only thing forbidden".²¹⁶

²¹³ BGE: 2 & 212 & EH: Wise 4.

²¹⁴ A: 15.

²¹⁵ A: 54 & 55.

²¹⁶ A: 48.

A person who embraces an imposed form of willing such as the morality of selflessness restores some sort of order to their anarchic drives and instincts, but this order is ‘tyrannized’, and they remain a corrupted individual with corrupted tastes. Such a person may be so convinced of the merit and direction that this imposed moral will has given to their lives, that he then goes on to try and help impose the same will on others. This proclivity to embrace and endorse an imposed form of willing, on the pretext that it one is merely following a ‘true’ or conventionally agreed upon law, is the defining characteristic that distinguishes the more common ‘typical’ decadent from the rarer ‘unruly’ type discussed earlier:²¹⁷

A typical decadent, who has a sense of necessity in his corrupted taste, who uses it to lay claim to a higher taste, who knows how to enforce his corruption as a law, as progress, as fulfilment.

4.5.5 The Advantages and Disadvantages of ‘Imposed Willing’ Over ‘Not Willing’

For Nietzsche there are two main *advantages* to what I call the ‘imposed willing’ of the ‘typical’ decadent, over the alternative of ‘not willing’ of the ‘unruly’ decadent. The first advantage is that the theoretical basis of idealism and the practice of the morality of selflessness (imposed willing) enable the weak to will and to affirm their lives, even if only in a restricted sense. The basis of idealism gives meaning to the decadent’s suffering, by allowing them to avoid the passive nihilism of being unable to find any purpose for their lives. Yet, what it achieves is to make the weak capable of willing ‘nothing’, for all they desire is peace by escaping the suffering of this world.²¹⁸ An imposed will can still be construed as advantageous in that it is better to will nothing, than finding nothing to will at all as in the case of passive nihilism. The second advantage of ‘imposed willing’ of the ‘typical’ decadent is that it induces a limited form of freedom. It enables its adherents to act according to their moral valuation, rather than the acutely disgregated will of the ‘unruly’ decadent who, recall,

²¹⁷ *EH*: Clever, 5 & BT, 1, *CW*: 5 & 7, A: 30 & 51 & *KSA*: 13:15[88].

²¹⁸ *GM*: II, 24, III, 14 & A: 18.

merely reacts to external stimuli and lacks freedom altogether.²¹⁹ From Nietzsche's perspective however, these advantages are still out-weighed by the *disadvantages* of 'imposed willing', which are threefold.

The first disadvantage is that the will to the nothingness of ascetic self-denial is effectively a sham response. It only pretends to overcome the decadent's inability to resist his instincts. The will to nothingness is simply adopted by those who are still too weak to attain Nietzsche's alternative ideal – to create a will of their own – and is indicative of the fact that its adherents are not self-organized nor reconciled with their instincts, and must subject themselves to the superior force of morality.²²⁰

The second disadvantage is that the morality of selflessness actually intensifies the decadence and weakness of its adherents using two techniques. On the one hand, the core values of asceticism and pity combine to weaken the resolve of decadents to resist external stimuli. This is accomplished by turning the incapacity to resist either the suffering inflicted upon themselves, or the moral instinct to assuage the suffering they witness in others into a virtue. Asceticism not only necessitates resistance to the ascetic's own instincts, it also requires the ascetic capitulate to those who inflict suffering in this world deferring his vengeance to the 'true world'.²²¹ Moreover, the morality of selflessness trains its adherents to feel pity instinctively, such that one is incapable of being unsympathetic and not reacting to the suffering of another.²²² The morality of selflessness further augments decadence through its suppression of doubt and any opportunity for seeking new knowledge claims, as Nietzsche puts it in *The Anti-Christ*, "the church *has* to condemn all straight, honest, scientific paths to knowledge as *forbidden* paths".²²³ Alternatively, moralists and theologians

²¹⁹ *GM*: III, 28.

²²⁰ *TI*: Socrates, 11.

²²¹ *A*: 29. *Cf.*, *TI*: Skirmishes, 34.

²²² *A*: 7. *Cf.*, *TI*: Skirmishes, 37.

²²³ *A*: 52.

browbeat their followers with doomsday scenarios and “try to talk people into thinking they are in a very bad way and need some severe, final, radical cure”.²²⁴

The third disadvantage of ‘imposed willing’ is that Nietzsche believes that the act of acquiescing to mere faith as the basis of one’s judgment is to act merely on a slavish conscience that is forged by an authority one fears, be that a deity or community. This is for him comparable to all adherents of morality submitting to a conventionally agreed upon law²²⁵ – the defining trait of the ‘typical’ decadent.²²⁶ The selfless cannot be said to have their own resolve. They make decisions and act based only on the beliefs of the group of which they are a part, and it is for this reason that Nietzsche calls it a herd morality. Increasing incapacity to think for oneself only reinforces blind acceptance by all, with the consequence that herd morality becomes interminable and self-perpetuating. As a result, challenging the prevailing status quo becomes increasingly more difficult.²²⁷

The three disadvantages – a will to nothingness, that intensifies weakness, and inculcates a slavish, herd-like conscience – seriously inhibit any attempt by any nascent ‘strong’ decadent to resist and escape from the domination of the morality of selflessness and forge an alternative way of life for themselves. Rather these three factors combine to make the influence of herd morality incontrovertible and while of obvious benefit to the community as a whole, it is especially beneficial to its weakest members who need the community’s protection. The assimilation to the herd becomes complete with the realisation that an individual’s only value is his contribution to the functioning of the herd.²²⁸

To summarise then, for Nietzsche a decadent such as a Christian, is effectively a slave because his motivation or ‘feeling of power’ is essentially illusory. Any impetus is not really based on

²²⁴ GS: 326.

²²⁵ GS: 76.

²²⁶ CW: 5.

²²⁷ GS: 117 & 174.

²²⁸ GS: 116.

his or her willing, and the willing that does occur is deceptive. It is not guided by the decadent's own ideals, but rather by shared ideals – for example equality – which have usually been manipulated by superior social and political forces.²²⁹ Such ideals disregard the different sensuous aspects of the world that are required for individual willing:

When the emphasis of life is put on the 'beyond' rather than on life itself when it is put on *nothingness* –, then the emphasis has been completely removed from life.²³⁰

The interpretations of moral and religious judgements are actually misrepresentations where no distinction between reality and fantasy is made. Accordingly, they are merely examples of illusions²³¹ and self-deceptions²³² that mislead the individual with regard to the basic conditions of and actual capacities for willing:

When the natural consequences of an action are not 'natural' any more but instead are attributed to spectral, superstitious concepts, to 'God', to 'spirit', to the 'soul', as exclusively 'moral' consequences, as reward, punishment, warning, as a lesson, then the presuppositions of knowledge have been destroyed, – *and this is the greatest crime against humanity*.²³³

4.6 Conclusion

I have argued that what Nietzsche *principally* means by decadence is a life-inhibiting process of physiological decline. Recall that, for Nietzsche, physiology denotes primary the organization of drives and instincts that comprise the 'invisible' inner body, the mortal's 'soul' that he, as a physiophilologist, tries to study and interpret. However, both Nietzsche and commentators also refer to the effects of decadence, its signs and expressions, as decadence, which, in its most abstract sense, is construed as being pathologically life-averse. For the sake of clarity, in this chapter, I presented

²²⁹ A: 16. Cf., A: 54.

²³⁰ A: 43.

²³¹ TI: Improvers, 1.

²³² EH: Destiny, 7.

²³³ A: 49.

the causal process of decadence, in an ideal-theoretical reconstruction, as one of two halves; as physiological-decadence first, that second leads to psychological-decadence. Physiological-decadence can be traced to the onset of a weakened physiological condition arising from repressed drives and instincts induced by the demands of a conformist civil society. Psychological-decadence has its origins in the development of humanity's bad conscience, where an individual experiences bad feelings about himself, and then extends to encompass suffering from his own existence.

This physical and mental weakness and the accompanying suffering represent the two sides of the coin of decadence. The suffering leads to a desire to escape reality and all its perceived faults. Nietzsche refers to the compensating mind-set of metaphysical ideals as 'idealism'. These ideals are sustained by an inability or unwillingness on the part of their adherents to assess their validity, such that a vicious, deepening, and self-reinforcing circle of dependency ensues. (This is where any ideal-theoretical reconstruction reaches its limits.) The idealism loops back and exacerbates the bad conscience and reinforces the decadence as it generates a morality of selflessness. The latter depends on further sustaining the metaphysical convictions from which it arises, via the interdiction of potentially damaging questioning and rival knowledge claims. This intensifying aspect of decadence can be illustrated by returning to the drinking analogy. An individual who uses alcohol to cope with life may find their troubles really begin by losing their driving licence as a result of drink-driving. This then leads him to lose his job, which in turn leads to financial problems. The resultant stress leads to increased drinking which then causes associated health issues, a breakdown in personal relationships with friends and family. The now entrenched alcoholism – which is not acknowledged or addressed – leads to more drinking in order to cope with life in a self-reinforcing circle of dependency and escalating problems.

The most important effect of the process of decadence – the inability to 'will' and be 'free' in Nietzsche's special sense of these terms – can be best understood in the following way. The intolerable anarchic physiological-decadence as characterised by the acutely disgregated will of the

unfree 'unruly' decadent, leads to a requirement for some semblance of an imposed instinctual order and direction for their lives. This is achieved by adhering to some set of codified guiding principles as expressed, for example, in the psychological-decadence of the morality of selflessness – a life coping strategy based on a foundation of seemingly indubitable principles and ideals. Morality as a guiding principle appeals to those who are too weak to accept life for what it is. Subscribing to it provides meaning for their suffering and also reassurance so they can contend with the uncertain nature of existence. This is the hallmark of the 'typical' decadent who readily accepts and then propagates his guiding principle. It becomes his 'imposed will'. Since the vast majority of people are not really free agents in Nietzsche's eyes, they are classified by him as 'typical' decadents. They are unable to self-create or govern their own lives, and they are not even aware of their condition. We should note that as useful as the distinction between 'unruly' and 'typical' decadents is for our understanding of the process of decadence, it is one that Nietzsche by no means abides to. References to the indiscriminative category of 'decadent' are by far the norm.

Adhering to an existing guiding principle permits a second interpretation of what Nietzsche means by "inspired by weakness" as quoted in the introduction.²³⁴ Rather than the alternative – and yet compatible – interpretation discussed above, depicting a decadent's *original* formulation of such guiding principles as a product of their own weakness.²³⁵ Weakness and its promotion have become encapsulated in society's prevailing values, such that, in Nietzsche's view, humanity "has been *taught* decadence values, and *only* decadence values, as the highest values."²³⁶ So although the guiding principle is an instance or expression of psychological-decadence, the guiding principle has the potential to act effectively as the cause of new instances of physiological-decadence in other people. This explains the ambiguous manner in which Nietzsche uses the term 'decadence', an issue I will revisit in Chapter 9.2. For now we can note that decadence is not only a self-reinforcing phenomenon, it is also iterative and self-perpetuating, a point that can be quickly conveyed by again

²³⁴ EH: BT, 2.

²³⁵ See Chapter 4.4.2.

²³⁶ EH: Destiny, 7.

using the drinking analogy: the ready availability of alcohol combined with a tolerance for an ingrained drinking culture in most societies, leads to an almost unquestioned immersion in regular social drinking for many people. Yet, a habit of excessive drinking weakens the person and eventually results in a dependency on alcohol, with detrimental consequences for the person. Decadence, thus understood, emerges as a supreme challenge for those affected by it. In what follows, I will look closely at some of the exemplars Nietzsche judges to be affected by it.

PART III: EXEMPLARS OF DECADENCE

Chapter 5: Exemplar Decadents – An Overview

5.1 Introduction

The sheer magnitude of the scope of decadence is quantified by Nietzsche in two notebook entries. In one note he states that decadence “belongs to all epochs of mankind”.¹ In another entry he declares that decadence affects everyone, probably for a significant portion of their lives:

And as for decadence, it is represented in almost every sense by every man who does not die too soon:—thus he also knows from experience the instincts that belong to it:—almost every man is decadent for half his life.²

Given the scope of decadence, it is surprising that Nietzsche explicitly names only a dozen exemplars. Herbert Spencer “is a decadent”,³ while Ferdinand Delacroix,⁴ Epicurus,⁵ Socrates⁶ and the Goncourt brothers⁷ are each an example of a “typical decadent”, as is Richard Wagner,⁸ who is also labelled “the artist of decadence”,⁹ whereas his muse Arthur Schopenhauer is “the philosopher of decadence”.¹⁰ The latter, together with Charles Baudelaire are two of “[t]he modern pessimists as decadents”. These also include Giacomo Leopardi, Philipp Mainländer, Fyodor Dostoevsky and either Edmond or Jules de Goncourt.¹¹ Plato is described as “a first-rate decadent of style”,¹² but Pyrrho is merely one proponent of “two forms of Greek decadence”, with Epicurus as the other.¹³ This list of exemplars would not be complete without Nietzsche himself, who explosively proclaims: “I am a

¹ KSA: 13:11[226] = WLN, pp. 232-234/WP: 339.

² KSA: 13:14[182] = WP: 864.

³ TI: Skirmishes, 37 & KSA: 13:14[40] = WP: 53.

⁴ EH: Clever, 5. Nietzsche is possibly referring to Charles Baudelaire. Cf., KSA: 11:25[141].

⁵ A: 30.

⁶ EH: BT, 1.

⁷ KSA: 13:15[88].

⁸ CW: 5 & 7.

⁹ CW: 4 & 5.

¹⁰ CW: 4.

¹¹ Die modernen Pessimisten als décadents; KSA: 13:14[222] = MT. Cf., KSA: 13:14[25] & 13:15[34].

¹² TI: Ancients, 2.

¹³ KSA: 13:14[99] = WP: 437.

decadent, I am the opposite as well”.¹⁴ He believes that he has successfully resisted decadence, which explains why he also uses the past tense to refer to a time “[w]hen I was a decadent”.¹⁵

Further exemplar decadents can be discerned implicitly. For example, following a discussion of decadent types pertaining to the Gospels that mentions the Messiah, Nietzsche obliquely refers to a “most interesting decadent”, which is almost certainly a characterisation of Jesus.¹⁶ In a similar fashion, the following individuals can also be considered to be exemplars as their names are mentioned in connection with the term ‘decadence’: Buddha,¹⁷ Saint Paul,¹⁸ Immanuel Kant,¹⁹ Leo Tolstoy,²⁰ Victor Hugo,²¹ Blaise Pascal, Gustave Flaubert,²² and Johannes Brahms.²³ Then there are others who are far less obvious,²⁴ because their association with decadence is via some other term which Nietzsche states elsewhere as a form of decadence, such as ‘Romanticism’.²⁵ Since he views the following composers and literary artists as exponents of German Romanticism, he would presumably consider them all to be decadents: Robert Schumann, Felix Mendelssohn, Maria von Weber, (as well as the aforementioned Brahms),²⁶ Joseph von Eichendorff, Heinrich Heine, Ludwig Tieck, Ludwig Uhland and the brothers Grimm.²⁷

Nietzsche also makes some sweeping generalisations, including the following: “Woman has always conspired with the types of decadence”,²⁸ and also “the typical ‘free spirits’, like the ‘idealists’ and ‘beautiful souls’, are all decadents”.²⁹ Free spirits (*Freigeister*), in this context, are those who are widely regarded as ‘free thinking’ in that they have challenged society’s prevailing conceptions in some way. Yet in Nietzsche’s view, allegedly non-conformist individuals, such as David Strauss, are

¹⁴ *EH*: Wise, 2.

¹⁵ *EH*: Wise, 6.

¹⁶ *A*: 31.

¹⁷ *A*: 42.

¹⁸ *A*: 24 & *KSA*: 13:14[57] = *WP*: 171.

¹⁹ *A*: 11 & *TI*: Reason, 6.

²⁰ *A*: 7.

²¹ *KSA*: 13:16[29] = *WLN*, pp. 274-275/*WP*: 838.

²² *NCW*: Antipodes.

²³ *CW*: 2nd Postscript & *KGB*: III:5[(1888)/#1143] = *SL*, pp. 322-324.

²⁴ *TI*: Skirmishes, 1-6, probably discusses some people Nietzsche considers to be decadents, but without using the term.

²⁵ *KSA*: 13:11[10], 13:14[25] & 13:15[97].

²⁶ *KGB*: III:5[(1888)/#1009].

²⁷ *KSA*: 13:11[315] = *WP*: 106.

²⁸ *KSA*: 13:14[182] = *WP*: 864.

²⁹ *NCW*: Antipodes.

still under the influence of decadent values, particularly those of Christianity.³⁰ Aside then from most of the individuals mentioned so far, other named 'idealists' include Henrik Ibsen,³¹ Thomas Carlyle, Friedrich Schiller, Jules Michelet,³² Edgar Allan Poe³³ and Jean-Jacques Rousseau.³⁴ Moreover, we are told "Germans are idealists",³⁵ so it would appear all Germans are therefore decadents according to Nietzsche, as are all 'beautiful souls' (*schönen Seelen*). The latter is an ancient ethical term resurrected by Schiller and then used to refer to a person whose action is determined by duty in accordance with Kant's categorical imperative, yet does so with such dignity and grace that they act as if the action was freely chosen. This harmonious unity of duty and inclination is perceived as beautiful. Nietzsche is extremely critical of the idea of universal moral duties, and so criticises Kant's categorical imperative as a "*mortal danger*", as well as his denigrating of the inclination.³⁶

Generally speaking, the individuals Nietzsche describes explicitly or implicitly as exemplar decadents are part of a circle of thinkers that he was initially attracted to and admired, and then reacted against. He characterises this volte-face as "[k]nocking over idols", one of debunking their ideals which to him all amount to different versions of a rejection of reality.³⁷ This process of re-evaluation is certainly linked to the reappraisal of himself as having been under the spell of decadence by unwittingly revering exponents of it – and therefore being attracted to what is bad for oneself – with Schopenhauer and Wagner as the obvious examples of this pernicious influence. Previous commentators on Nietzsche's conception of decadence have a largely focussed on the decadents that Nietzsche discusses in detail, namely Socrates, Wagner, Jesus, Saint Paul, and of course Nietzsche himself.³⁸ Throughout I have used these decadents as examples in my general discussion of the phenomenon. In the following three chapters, I will examine, in the manner of a set of case histories, a number of other exemplars that are less discussed in the secondary literature. In

³⁰ *TI*: Germans, 2.

³¹ *EH*: Books, 5. *Cf.*, *KSA*: 12:10[66] = *WP*: 86.

³² *KSA*: 12:7[6] = *WP*: 343.

³³ *KSA*: 13:23[2] = *WP*: 815/Appendix, p. 555.

³⁴ *TI*: Skirmishes, 48 & *KSA*: 12:9[116].

³⁵ *EH*: CW, 1 & 2.

³⁶ *A*: 11. *Cf.*, *KSA*: 12:7[6] = *WP*: 275.

³⁷ *EH*: Preface, 2.

³⁸ See Ahern (1995), Conway (1997), Benson (2008) and Huddleston (2019).

the first case Nietzsche merely insinuates that Pascal is a decadent. In the other cases of Pyrrho, Epicurus and Spencer he states so explicitly. By comparison, these individuals have generated less interest from Nietzsche scholars – on any topic – let alone as exemplars of decadence. My hope is that extending my analysis to these less researched figures will add to our understanding of decadence. In each case I will apply the characteristic attributes that I established in the previous chapter: I will show that these figures display the different types of weakness – psychological, epistemological, metaphysical and agential expressions of weakness. In the concluding chapter I will then discuss whether all or only some of these attributes are necessary for someone to pass as a decadent. Before I turn to these minor figures, I will first, by way of comparison, briefly discuss Nietzsche’s depiction of the archetypal decadent, Wagner.

5.2 Wagner – The Archetypal Decadent

Does Wagner – “the *artist of decadence*”³⁹ – exhibit the four attributes of weakness that I have identified in the previous chapter?⁴⁰ Nietzsche makes nearly two thousand references to Wagner in his writings, and he is the subject of two book-length polemics, *The Case of Wagner* and *Nietzsche contra Wagner*. Nietzsche states that anyone wishing to understand decadence and make a “*diagnosis of the modern soul*” will find Wagner to be “its most *instructive case*”⁴¹ – a prime example of “a typical decadent”⁴² (as discussed in Chapters 3.3.3 and 4.5.4). For Nietzsche, Wagner “has suffered deeply”,⁴³ such that he is not really a person but “a sickness, who makes sick everything he touches – including his music”⁴⁴ – which is just another modern “expression of physiological contradiction”.⁴⁵ The diagnosis of Wagner that Nietzsche presents proceeds on the unstated assumption that the reader is already familiar with his general conception of decadence, and so

³⁹ CW: 4 & 5.

⁴⁰ Benson (2008) devotes an entire chapter to Nietzsche’s portrayal of Wagner’s decadence as quintessentially a need for redemption. Ridley (2014) by contrast focuses on the musical aspect, showing that Wagner’s purported rhythmic decadence is a symptom of a spiritual sickness. He therefore argues against a purely descriptive and non-evaluative sense of decadence as proposed by Fry (2013).

⁴¹ CW: Epilogue.

⁴² CW: 5 & 7.

⁴³ NCW: Admire.

⁴⁴ CW: 5.

⁴⁵ CW: 2nd Postscript.

provides little in the way of real explanation. I will begin my analysis with the first profound effect of decadence I have identified – that of psychological weakness.

Nietzsche claims that psychological weakness manifests itself in Wagner's propensity for acting that evidently betrays an inability to resist the decadence consuming him. He asks rhetorically "[d]id *hatred of life* gain control over him . . .?"⁴⁶ Wagner is portrayed as "essentially a man of the theatre and an actor, perhaps the most enthusiastic mimomaniac that ever existed".⁴⁷ In Nietzsche's analysis, the "transformation of art into acting is an expression of physiological degeneration (a form of hysteria, to be precise)".⁴⁸ Yet Wagner is so unaware that he is dominated by a single drive for theatricality and compelled by the need to make a spectacle, that he creates artistic forgeries that produce only artificial effects of art rather than art of real substance.⁴⁹ His music is "never true" for it really consists of cheap effects in miniature, lacking organic forms and an overarching vision that would turn his works into a coherent whole.⁵⁰ This dominant instinct manifests itself as a "will to unity", an instinctive desire to exert his unconscious vision on his audience at any price in order to unite with them, but he actually merely tyrannizes them instead.⁵¹ According to Nietzsche, Wagner is weak because his own work lacks coherence due to an absence of an underlying organizing idea and energy that is symptomatic of decadents.⁵²

The second debilitating effect of decadence that I have highlighted reflects a weakness with regard to truth and knowledge, which according to Nietzsche is also readily discernible in Wagner. Nietzsche holds that his works are pervaded by "*a deadly hatred of knowledge*",⁵³ especially a "hatred of science".⁵⁴ He sees this trait as evidently reflected in Wagner's slavish inability to assess critically the prevalent contemporary philosophical theories of Hegel, Feuerbach, and Schopenhauer, and also an unwillingness to embrace new scientific developments. Rather Wagner meekly follows in

⁴⁶ NCW: Apostles, 3.

⁴⁷ NCW: Objections.

⁴⁸ CW: 7.

⁴⁹ CW: 7 & 8. Cf., RWB: 2.

⁵⁰ CW: 8 & NCW: Objections.

⁵¹ KSA: 13:11[312] = WP: 849.

⁵² CW: 2nd Postscript.

⁵³ CW: Postscript.

⁵⁴ GS: 99.

the footsteps of “Feuerbach’s dictum of ‘healthy sensuality’”,⁵⁵ and is swayed by the prevailing European “*taste*” for Hegel, “[h]e just applied it to music – invented a style that ‘meant the infinite’, – he became *Hegel’s heir* . . . Music as ‘Idea’”.⁵⁶ Following this detrimental influence of Hegelianism, Wagner is then led further astray by Schopenhauer:

Until the middle of his life, Richard Wagner let himself be misled by Hegel; he repeated this mistake when he started reading Schopenhauer’s doctrine into his characters and began expressing himself in terms of ‘will’, ‘genius’, and ‘compassion’ . . . the enchantment to which he succumbed with regard to this thinker has blinded him not only to other philosophers but also to science; his entire art increasingly wants to present itself as a companion piece and supplement to Schopenhauer’s philosophy . . .⁵⁷

Wagner’s lack of healthy scepticism towards certain philosophers and their theories betrays that he is too weak to think on his own.

The third effect of decadence follows on directly from the second: Wagner shows a predilection for illusory metaphysical ideals, which Nietzsche interprets as a rejection of reality. According to Nietzsche, Wagner’s underlying weakness manifests itself in a “contempt for the world”⁵⁸ that is clearly reflected in the mythical content of his works.⁵⁹ His whole artistic ideal for Bayreuth is a made up “Wagnerian reality”, akin to a *fata morgana* – a complex mirage.⁶⁰ Wagner the decadent not only exploits the weakness of his followers through his false spectacles, he exacerbates the nervous exhaustion of his audience. He satisfies the audience’s craving for relief from their own suffering via a diet of what are merely diversionary fairy tales, and thereby providing them with a feeling of redemption rather than trying to challenge and elevate them.⁶¹ Wagner’s decadence shows that he suffers from himself. Consequently he is drawn to ‘ideals’ that will bring

⁵⁵ *GM*: III, 3.

⁵⁶ *CW*: 10.

⁵⁷ *GS*: 99.

⁵⁸ *CW*: 8.

⁵⁹ *CW*: 9.

⁶⁰ *EH*: BT, 4.

⁶¹ *CW*: 5 & 8.

him respite. The latter he then projects onto and are adopted by his decadent audience.⁶² Wagner is perhaps best understood as analogous to *The Genealogy's* ascetic priest⁶³ in the way he exerts an unhealthy seductive influence.⁶⁴ The values that guide Wagner's cultural contribution are, Nietzsche judges, ultimately not life-affirming. Instead they foster decadence⁶⁵ in offering redemption in the vein of Schopenhauer who views music as salvific.⁶⁶ His advocating of redemption is then explicitly presented in his opera *The Ring*⁶⁷ and in a specifically Christian form in *Parsifal*,⁶⁸ Wagner slanders life in this world by offering redemption in another.⁶⁹

This brings me to what we saw as perhaps the most profound effect of decadence: a lack of agency. The decadent's increasing weakness results in his restricted agency and unfreedom. According to Nietzsche, Wagner, just like Kant,⁷⁰ remains an underhand Christian,⁷¹ and alluding to Wagner's last work, *Parsifal*, Nietzsche describes him as "a decaying, despairing decadent, [who] suddenly sank down helpless and shattered before the Christian cross".⁷² Wagner is then both another victim and an exponent of this form that I call an 'imposed willing', such that "Wagner was something *complete*, a typical decadent lacking any 'free will'".⁷³ He "knew only too well what an artist forfeits when he loses his freedom, his *respect* for himself. He is condemned to be an actor. His very art becomes for him a constant attempt to escape, a means of self-oblivion, of self-narcosis". At the end of the day, Nietzsche considers Wagner the archetype example of "an 'unfree' man".⁷⁴

This brief and incomplete analysis should suffice to show that Wagner satisfies the criteria of a decadent by displaying all the identified attributes. And yet, Nietzsche's diagnosis of Wagner remains obscure unless the reader is already familiar with his conception of decadence. Only then

⁶² CW: Postscript.

⁶³ GM: III, 5.

⁶⁴ CW: 5.

⁶⁵ CW: 3 & Epilogue.

⁶⁶ CW: 4.

⁶⁷ CW: 4.

⁶⁸ Benson (2008), pp. 111-116, challenges the Christian interpretation of Wagner's operas.

⁶⁹ NCW: Antipodes.

⁷⁰ TI: Reason, 6.

⁷¹ KSA: 13:14[42] = WP: 840.

⁷² NCW: Broke. Cf., HH: II, Preface 3.

⁷³ CW: 7.

⁷⁴ KSA: 13:23[2] = WP: 815/Appendix, p. 555.

can the reader appreciate why Nietzsche interprets Wagner in such a way. It is worth stating here that Nietzsche's analysis seems quite disingenuous, inaccurate, and resentful. Certain facts are chosen by Nietzsche to fit his prescribed theory and those that don't are left out – a proclivity we shall see more of later when I examine the other exemplars. For instance, there is simply no mention of Wagner's *The Mastersingers* which as Julian Young points out is Wagner's life-affirming celebration of community and art, whose message "is virtually identical with, possibly even the inspiration for, Nietzsche's own theory of cultural development".⁷⁵

5.3 Goethe – The Archetypal Non-Decadent

Although Nietzsche takes pleasure in extolling why Wagner is a decadent, he curiously does not categorially state whom he considers *not* to be a decadent, nor what *exactly* this would entail other than "the type of person who is strong and sure of life."⁷⁶ Hence, if decadence is understood as expressions of weakness, then one can look for those individuals that, generally speaking, Nietzsche classes as strong and flourishing, such as Alcibiades, Julius Caesar, Frederick the Great, Leonardo da Vinci,⁷⁷ William Shakespeare⁷⁸ and Guy de Maupassant.⁷⁹ This would include anyone he praises in his writings of *circa* 1888 and whom he contrasts with Wagner. The list of non-decadents will then include all his favourite composers, Ludwig van Beethoven,⁸⁰ Georges Bizet,⁸¹ Johann Sebastian Bach, Frederic Chopin, George Frideric Handel, Gioacchino Rossini, Pietro Gasti, Heinrich Schütz, and possibly Franz Liszt.⁸² Less of an obvious statement of personal preference is those individuals Nietzsche deems to have rejected all forms of idealism and to have embraced 'reality' instead as discussed in the previous chapter. This includes Napoleon Bonaparte, who is hailed as "*ens*

⁷⁵ Young (2010), p. 496.

⁷⁶ *EH*: Destiny, 5. Although, Nietzsche remarks that "[t]he Jews are the opposite of decadents", *A*: 24, and mentions some attributes when describing himself as "the *opposite* of a decadent", *EH*: Wise, 2.

⁷⁷ *BGE*: 200.

⁷⁸ *KSA*: 11:27[59] = *WP*: 966.

⁷⁹ *EH*: Clever, 3.

⁸⁰ *CW*: 8 & *NCW*: Future.

⁸¹ *CW*: Preface.

⁸² *EH*: Clever, 7. *Cf.*, *NCW*: Intermezzo.

realissimum [the most real thing]”,⁸³ Thucydides, “the most perfect expression of the *sophists'* culture, by which I mean the *realists'* culture”,⁸⁴ and, finally, Heraclitus, who “will always be right in thinking that being is an empty fiction. The 'apparent' world is the only world: the 'true world' is just *a lie added on to it*”.⁸⁵

Perhaps a more helpful approach to understanding of what constitutes a non-decadent is to attempt to identify any individual who Nietzsche discusses as having the very opposite of the four identified attributes of weakness of a decadent. That is to say someone who exhibits strengths pertaining to the psychological, epistemological, metaphysics, and agency. An obvious candidate is the one person Nietzsche considers a paragon of excellence consistently throughout his writings – Johann Wolfgang von Goethe. Yet whereas the decadent Wagner is subject to two book length polemics as mentioned above, by comparison Goethe’s exceptional characteristics only warrants one sustained passage in Nietzsche’s entire later oeuvre that focuses on decadence. This passage extolling Goethe’s virtues appears in *Twilight of the Idols*, where Nietzsche tells us that Goethe is the antipode of Kant – who one can infer is a decadent as mentioned above – and this would suggest that we may consider the former an exemplar non-decadent for Nietzsche.⁸⁶ Indeed, in this adulatory passage we can clearly identify our four attributes of strength pertaining to the non-decadent. Nietzsche portrays Goethe as psychologically strong in that he not only resisted the different types of weakness that enveloped his contemporaries, he instead embodies self-control because “[w]hat he wanted was *totality*; he fought against the separation of reason, sensibility, feeling, will”, and instead “disciplined himself to wholeness”. His mastery of epistemological matters is reflected in his all-encompassing “use of history, science, antiquity”. The fact that Goethe “adapted himself to resolutely closed horizons” and yet “he did not remove himself from life, he put himself squarely in the middle of it”, displays his willingness to embrace critical thinking through creative engagement with society and culture. Nietzsche forthrightly declares in “an age inclined to

⁸³ *TI*: Skirmishes, 49.

⁸⁴ *TI*: Ancients, 2.

⁸⁵ *TI*: Reason, 2.

⁸⁶ *TI*: Skirmishes, 49.

unreality”, Goethe by comparison rejected the prevalence of metaphysical ideals by being “a convinced realist”. And lastly, since he was “a person lacking all prohibitions except for *weakness*”, his agency was never curtailed by following the prevailing culturally restrictive customs, but rather Goethe attained the pinnacle of personal development. Evidently Nietzsche believes that it is difficult to think of a better example of “[a] spirit like this who has *become free*” (*ein solcher freigewordner Geist*).⁸⁷

For Nietzsche then, Goethe is someone who achieved a certain kind of self-overcoming in resisting the unhealthy influences of his own century, by cultivating and unifying a set of powerful, diverse *natural* instincts. According to Nietzsche, Goethe embraces the healthy, natural values of the Renaissance period, people who were similar calibre to the higher type that Nietzsche associates with ancient Greece.⁸⁸ In his striving to cultivate and unify a diversity of instincts, Goethe demonstrates that to be a unified self for Nietzsche means that one possesses a coherent configuration of diverse drives and instincts, and hence is ‘well-constituted’ (*wohlgerathen*) – literally, a ‘well-turned-out’ type that is the opposite of the ill-constituted decadent.⁸⁹ A belief in reality and fate results in Goethe fashioning a culture of values that affirms his life, on a path set out by himself, thereby achieving his self-creation.⁹⁰ Goethe is an example of someone who “*does not negate*”, but rather embraces life in general and partakes in an affirmation of the world.⁹¹ This is an “inverse ideal” to Schopenhauer’s pessimism that Nietzsche comes to regard as hostile to life.⁹²

According to Nietzsche then, anyone aspiring to greatness and wishing to resist decadence, does not passively accept values but rather seeks to fashion their own values and thereby enrich and shape their culture. In order to create and promote these higher values, a possible prerequisite is to first *successfully* engage in what Nietzsche calls ‘active’ rather than ‘passive’ nihilism, a contrast that

⁸⁷ *TI*: Skirmishes, 49.

⁸⁸ *KSA*: 12:5[89] = *WLN*, p. 122. *Cf.*, *TI*: Skirmishes, 49.

⁸⁹ *KSA*: 11:41[6] = *WLN*, pp. 48-49/*WP*: 1051.

⁹⁰ See, for example, Gemes (2009), Katsafanas (2011), and Huddleston (2019).

⁹¹ *TI*: Skirmishes, 49.

⁹² *BGE*: 56.

was examined in Chapter 3.3.3.⁹³ According to Nietzsche's conception, decadents possess a dis-unified soul that is 'at war with itself'.⁹⁴ Their soul is merely a motley collection of drives that remains and lacks direction.⁹⁵ Those who have managed to curb their instinctual chaos often end up under the tyranny of one instinct: Wagner – acting,⁹⁶ Socrates – reason⁹⁷ and Spencer – altruism,⁹⁸ and so too are Kant⁹⁹ and Pascal¹⁰⁰ – their faith in Christianity – which they value even more than reason.¹⁰¹ In either case, the anarchic instincts of the directionless 'unruly' decadent or the tyrannized instincts of the fixated 'typical' decadent such as Wagner and Socrates, induce a separation from those other natural instincts that Goethe for example, fights to retain.¹⁰² Whereas a noble individual like Goethe creates values,¹⁰³ a decadent like Kant,¹⁰⁴ merely strives to justify existing ones:¹⁰⁵ Kant – duty,¹⁰⁶ Wagner – redemption,¹⁰⁷ Schopenhauer – pity,¹⁰⁸ which are neither new nor life affirming in Nietzsche's assessment. And since they all defend universal values that are deemed to be apply to everyone, despite their other evident achievements, they are ultimately decadent and cannot be considered a 'free' agent, by which Nietzsche means efficacious, strong-willed, autonomous agents.

With this contrast in mind between Wagner and Goethe, I will turn my analysis to Pascal.

⁹³ KSA: 12:9[35] = *WLN*, pp. 146-147/*WP*: 23.

⁹⁴ *BGE*: 200 & 208, & KSA: 11:34[67] = *WLN*, p. 5.

⁹⁵ *BGE*: 200.

⁹⁶ *CW*: 8 & *RWB*: 2.

⁹⁷ *TI*: Socrates, 10.

⁹⁸ KSA: 9:8[35].

⁹⁹ A: 10 & KSA: 12:7[4] = *WP*: 530.

¹⁰⁰ A: 5.

¹⁰¹ This point directly touches on the contemporary debate within Nietzsche scholarship concerning whether a drive predominance model is solely instrumental in providing unity to a self, as briefly elucidated in Chapter 3.2. Katsafanas (2016), pp. 164-196, comprehensively reviews the various interpretations and rejects the view that unity of the self is best achieved via a co-ordinating 'master' drive, rather than a dominate 'tyrannical' drive. He instead argues, controversially, that a unity among drives and also self-conscious (reflective) thought leads to a unity of the self. Due to space considerations, I cannot examine his claims here.

¹⁰² *TI*: Skirmishes, 49. Cf., KSA: 11:34[36] = *WLN*, p. 2 & 11:41[6] = *WLN*, pp. 48-49/*WP*: 1051.

¹⁰³ *BGE*: 260.

¹⁰⁴ *TI*: Skirmishes, 49.

¹⁰⁵ *BGE*: 211.

¹⁰⁶ A: 11.

¹⁰⁷ *CW*: 3 & Epilogue.

¹⁰⁸ A: 7.

Chapter 6: Pascal – The Decadent Christian

6.1 Introduction

Nietzsche expresses admiration for Pascal throughout his writings despite the disparity of their views, especially concerning the truth and value of Christianity and the merits of living a life of asceticism.¹ This respect betrays an inherent fascination in understanding how someone widely acknowledged as a genius came to hold what Nietzsche regards as self-destructive beliefs:

One should never forgive Christianity for having destroyed men like Pascal. One should never cease fighting against this in Christianity: that it has the will to shatter precisely the strongest and most noble souls.²

In Nietzsche's writings Pascal is mentioned over 120 times with a steady increase from around 1880. These remarks are the result of reading Pascal in 1878, 1880 and again in 1887,³ from a German edition entitled *Gedanken, Fragmente und Briefe* (*Thoughts, Fragments and Letters*), that was largely based on Pascal's *Pensées*, the latter's unfinished Apology for the Christian religion.⁴ Nietzsche thought highly of Pascal's use of the aphoristic form in the *Pensées*, such that his penchant for its style might be traceable to this work.⁵ Even when analysing his subject's decadence, he still considers him to be "an extraordinary individual",⁶ and one "whom I almost love, because he has taught me such an infinite amount—the only *logical* Christian".⁷

Nietzsche never explicitly labels Pascal as a decadent. Nevertheless, this has not prevented Ryan Boyd – one of a handful of commentators to examine the relationship between the two – to correctly state that in Nietzsche's view Pascal is a "decadent *par excellence*", although he does not

¹ *HH*: II, 408, *BGE*: 45, 62 & 229, *GM*: III, 17, *TI*: Errors, 6, *KSA*: 12:10[128] = *WLN*, pp. 196-197/*WP*: 388, 13:11[55] = *WLN*, pp. 209-210/*WP*: 252 & 13:12[1].

² *KSA*: 13:11[55] = *WLN*, pp. 209-210/*WP*: 252.

³ Brobjer (2008), p. 252.

⁴ Natoli (1985), p. 89. Cf., Voegelin (1996), pp. 131-132.

⁵ *KSA*: 11:35[31] = *WP*: 424.

⁶ [E]inem außerordentlichen Individuum, wie Pascal . . . , *KSA*: 13:12[1] = *MT*.

⁷ *KGB*: III:5[(1888)/#1151] = *SL*, p. 327.

explain what this entails.⁸ Eric Voegelin also misses the opportunity to examine Pascal's decadence in any detail when he informatively clarifies the importance for Nietzsche of Pascal as an exemplar of Christianity:

Pascal acquires in the later work a typical function similar to that of other great figures. Pascal is most frequently meant when Nietzsche says "the Christian," just as "the philosopher" means Schopenhauer, "the artist" means Wagner . . .⁹

Hence, in *Beyond Good and Evil*, the impassioned, intellectually honest and probing free spirit, as personified by Nietzsche himself, is contrasted with the conforming religious character exemplified by Pascal.¹⁰ Nietzsche compares Catholicism, the most pervasive religion of France, "the *most Christian* nation on earth" at the time of Pascal's birth,¹¹ with Protestantism – that "boring form of decadence"¹² – which, due to a northern European fondness for beer, he regards as equally unconvincing and a lazier and more modest form of Christianity.¹³ Yet Voegelin like two other commentators, Charles Natoli¹⁴ and Henri Birault,¹⁵ fails to make the connection to decadence. Since any variant of Christianity is a type,¹⁶ a movement,¹⁷ a religion¹⁸ of decadence for Nietzsche, together with the fact that Pascal is in his opinion "in unity of fervour, spirit and honesty the first of all Christians", it is likely that Pascal is an exemplar decadent.¹⁹ In order to emphasise that Pascal's distinctive decadent character trait is discernible in comparable individuals, he becomes for Nietzsche another example of an 'ism',²⁰ in this case one of self-loathing.²¹ For Nietzsche, he is also *the* exemplar of "Christian corruption (Pascal as type)", as defined in what I termed the 'Christian

⁸ Boyd (2011), pp. 67-68.

⁹ Voegelin (1996), p. 144.

¹⁰ *BGE*: 24-44 & 45-63.

¹¹ *D*: 192.

¹² *KSA*: 12:10[54] = *WP*: 88.

¹³ *KSA*: 13:14[45] = *WP*: 89.

¹⁴ Natoli (1985), p. 81.

¹⁵ Birault (1988), p. 263 & p. 279.

¹⁶ *KSA*: 12:10[96] = *WLN*, p. 190/*WP*: 174.

¹⁷ *KSA*: 13:15[8] = *WLN*, p. 268/*WP*: 90.

¹⁸ *A*: 20.

¹⁹ *D*: 192.

²⁰ Another example is the following paradigm of weakness as personified by the decadent Thomas Carlyle: "Conversely: the need for faith, for some unconditional yes or no, Carlylism (*Carlylismus*), if you will excuse the expression, is a need of the *weak*", *A*: 54. *Cf.*, *A*: 12 & *KSA*: 12:10[144] = *WP*: 312.

²¹ *KSA*: 12:2[144] = *WLN*, pp. 89-90/*WP*: 240 & 12:10[144] = *WP*: 312. *Cf.*, 11:25[121].

recipe for decadence' in Chapter 1.3.4, in addition to being an important and yet unwitting proponent for it.²² This inference to Pascal's decadence can be corroborated further by searching Nietzsche's writings for his ascription to Pascal of physiological-decadence (as discussed in Chapter 4.1). This way one can uncover plenty of indirect evidence that confirms that he considers him to be a decadent; in fact, "the most pitiful example" of Christianity's mendacious corruption of a once noble and higher person.²³

On the surface, Pascal's and Nietzsche's positions have a certain affinity. Briefly put, both of them hold that humanity has become 'corrupted' and must be in some way 'redeemed'. For Pascal, the problem can be construed by embracing the standard Christian doctrine of the fall, and he proposes divine grace as the remedy.²⁴ For Nietzsche, the problem is physiologically induced by a pervading emasculating morality of *ressentiment*, which instils a subsequent decline of health and vitality. He proposes that this can only be stemmed by the creation of new values as a remedy. In order to assess whether Pascal is best understood as a decadent, I will examine Nietzsche's scattered comments on Pascal using the four attributes of weakness identified in Chapter 4. I will first ask whether there is evidence that Nietzsche sees the criterion of psychological weakness expressed in Pascal.

6.2 The Psychological: A Weakness Inspired by Christianity

As early as 1880, Nietzsche comments on Pascal's predilection for self-deception, which he later construes as a form psychological weakness: "The self-deception of Pascal: he already starts from Christian predispositions."²⁵ This early comment suggests that one can interpret Nietzsche's portrayal of Pascal's decadence as the outcome of the accumulative effects of a lifetime of Christian belief. Pascal was born into a pious Catholic family that subsequently converted to Jansenism, and

²² KSA: 13:14[6] = WP: 51

²³ A: 5.

²⁴ Pascal (1995), #[131]/(434).

²⁵ Der Selbstbetrug Pascals: er geht schon von christlichen Prädispositionen aus. KSA: 9:7[184] = MT.

he underwent a second conversion at the age of thirty-one where the “hidden God”²⁶ of Christianity, and not the one portrayed by contemporary philosophers and theologians, revealed himself to him. For Nietzsche, Pascal is someone who is a casualty of what I called ‘imposed willing’ in Chapter 4.5.2, determined by an externally generated and imposed will. This oppression manifests itself in psychological symptoms but has, again Nietzsche is clear, physiological causes:

Pascal, I love him as Christianity's most instructive victim, massacred slowly, first physically then psychologically, the whole logic of this most horrible form of inhuman cruelty . . .²⁷

Pascal’s underlying physiological weakness is a result of a tyrannising instinct instilled by the prevailing dictates of a Christian culture.²⁸ There is a strong possibility that Nietzsche incorrectly interpreted what Pascal’s biographers call his ‘worldly period’ – his scorning of strict Jansenism’s moral rigour and his attempts to live by a new freer-thinking value system of *honnêteté*²⁹ – as a failed attempt to resist the pernicious influence of the Christianity he was immersed in from birth.³⁰ In Nietzsche’s view, this struggle might have succeeded if only he had lived long enough to benefit from the waning power of Christianity, which he considers to have been approaching a point of exhaustion after the French revolution.³¹

Pascal, who died only thirty years too soon, in order to scorn Christianity, as he had formerly done over the Jesuits when young, from his splendid bitter-hearted soul.³²

However, for Nietzsche the underlying physiological weakness that has been caused by Pascal’s Christian beliefs eventually reasserts itself by so corrupting his instincts that it develops into an overpowering psychological corruption that finally consumes him:

²⁶ Pascal (1995), #[228]/(751), #[427]/(194), #[449]/(556) & #[781]/(242).

²⁷ EH: Clever, 3.

²⁸ A: 5.

²⁹ A secular social ideal of civilizing self-restraint shared by a generation of the French elite – including the playwright Molière – that was related not so much to virtue, as to a set of valorized practices including honour, politeness and honesty.

³⁰ “Yet Pascal was never tempted by religious scepticism . . . There was never a Pascal *libertin*.”, Rogers in Hammond (2003), p.14.

³¹ KSA: 12:2[144] = WLN, pp. 89-90/WP: 240.

³² Pascal, der nur dreißig Jahr zu früh starb, um aus seiner prachtvollen bitterbösen Seele heraus über das Christenthum selber hohnzulachen, wie er es früher und jünger über die Jesuiten gethan hat. KSA: 11:34[148] = MT.

What are we fighting against in Christianity? That it wants to shatter the strong, that it wants to discourage their courage, exploit their bad moments and weariness, transform their proud assurance into unease and qualms of conscience; that it knows how to make the noble instincts poisonous and sick, until their force, their will to power turns back, turns against itself – until the strong are destroyed by orgies of despising and maltreating themselves: that horrifying kind of destruction whose most famous example is Pascal.³³

For Nietzsche, Pascal's corruption is completed by his second conversion which instigates the latter's embracing of the doctrine of original sin and the belief in man's wretchedness without a Christian faith. He becomes for Nietzsche an exemplar of a weakness of self-hatred inspired by Christianity or 'Pascalism' (*Pascalismus*) for short:

[O]ne contents oneself with an *opiate* Christianity because one hasn't the strength either for searching, struggling, daring, wanting to stand alone – or for Pascalism, that brooding self-contempt, that belief in human unworthiness, that anxiety of the 'possibly condemned'.³⁴

For Pascal, the human condition can only be understood from a religious point of view that stands well above it. It rests on a conviction of the existence of a truth that is hidden from us. As Pascal puts it in *Pensées*, this truth will only come to light with our understanding of the greatness of God: "All things on earth show man's wretchedness and God's mercy, man's helplessness without God and man's power with God."³⁵ The result is that, in Nietzsche's eyes, Pascal is a "genuine" Christian, and is cited as the antipode of a great artist. Whereas the latter is laden with strength, driven by a need for perfection that is a reflection of their own strong constitution, Pascal is merely one of those "victims of life" who instead possesses "a specific anti-artistry of the instinct, – a way of being that impoverishes all things, dilutes them, makes them waste away."³⁶

The second debilitating attribute of decadence that we identified reflects a weakness with regard to understanding and evaluating knowledge claims, which is the topic I will turn to next.

³³ KSA: 13:11[55] = *WLN*, pp. 209-210/*WP*: 252.

³⁴ KSA: 12:2[144] = *WLN*, pp. 89-90/*WP*: 240.

³⁵ Pascal (1995), #[468]/(562).

³⁶ *TI*: Skirmishes, 9.

6.3 The Epistemological: Pascal's 'Weak' Scepticism

In Nietzsche's opinion the underlying cause of Pascal's corruption by Christianity lies in a psychology of error, the confusion whereby a cause is mistakenly taken for an effect, which as we have seen in Chapter 4.2.3, is for him symptomatic of a decadent's weakened physiology. Pascal is typical of the decadent's inability to evaluate Christian morality correctly, the product of following an ideal that encapsulates weakness and saps any remaining strength to determine their own knowledge claims. Following the doctrine of original sin as expounded by St Augustine, Pascal believed that his reason was corrupted as a direct result of it: that disobedience in consuming from the tree of knowledge of good and evil has led to his own and humanity's subsequent moral decay and need for salvation.³⁷

Nietzsche argues that the contrary is the case:

[T]he corruption of Pascal, who believed that his reason was corrupted by original sin when the only thing corrupting it was Christianity itself!³⁸

Pascal is indicative of a higher type who effectively sacrificed his intellect,³⁹ a victim of a historical trend that had swept across Europe over the centuries and replaced a healthier and 'strong' scepticism with the faith of the weak.⁴⁰

Although the accuracy of claims concerning Pascal's sceptical tendencies are subject to scholarly debate which need not concern us here,⁴¹ they are nonetheless interpreted by Nietzsche as of the 'weak' variety because they are grounded in doubt and fear, all of which for him is symptomatic of a degraded configuration of the soul. This is contrary to his preferred 'strong' scepticism that advocates a sense of questioning and challenging of existing beliefs and values. As we have seen above, Nietzsche believes Pascal's capability for a more discerning and scrutinising 'strong' kind of scepticism might have reasserted itself at a later period, if only Pascal had lived long

³⁷ Pascal (1995), #[695]/(445).

³⁸ A: 5. Cf., KSA: 12:9[182] = WP: 83.

³⁹ BGE: 45 & 229.

⁴⁰ BGE: 46.

⁴¹ Natoli (1985), p. 48, interprets the *Pensées* fragment entitled 'Against Scepticism', as proof that Pascal was not a sceptic. Voegelin (1996), pp. 130-131, claims that it is doubtful that Nietzsche saw Pascal as expounding a philosophical creed of scepticism.

enough to benefit from the diminishing power of Christianity. He is just another example of a thinker who gives “excessive weight to moral values or to fictions of the ‘beyond’”.⁴² In Nietzsche’s view, Pascal is using “corrupted reason” to deny the possibility of knowledge, and he does so merely to follow the usual decadent practice of preserving moral values as the highest kind, which in Pascal’s case is then used to promote Christian values.⁴³ For Nietzsche, Pascal’s approach forces his reader into a moral evaluation of the world, such that the latter eventually finds it to be grossly wanting and allied to the need for a better one: “Pascal used even moralistic skepticism in order to excite the need for faith (‘to justify it’).”⁴⁴ In Nietzsche’s eyes, Pascal then expresses decadence in the same terms and values of weakness and fatigue as the romantic pessimism of Schopenhauer and others, and which like Christianity, are inherently nihilistic “because they all have glorified the concept opposed to life, nothingness, as a goal, ‘God’ as the highest good”.⁴⁵

As is well known, for Pascal, the human existential situation is one of finding oneself alone in a seemingly infinite universe that is impossible to comprehend and without obvious purpose. Since there is no reliable natural theology, and we cannot rationally identify any putative system of religious revelation as *bona fide*, the human being is forced into a wager in which each one of us has to stake our destiny upon a choice of stances:

‘Either God is or he is not.’ But to which view shall we be inclined? Reason cannot decide this question. Infinite chaos separates us. At the far end of this infinite distance a coin is being spun which will come down heads or tails. How will you wager? Reason cannot make you choose either, reason cannot prove either wrong.⁴⁶

Pascal argues that the expected value of theistic belief is vastly greater than that of unbelief. This is because if one believes and commits oneself to a Christian life of faith in God and it turns out to be true, then one wins an immense reward – eternal life. If one believes but it turns out to be false,

⁴² KSA: 13:11[228] = WP: 1020.

⁴³ KSA: 12:9[160] = WP: 578.

⁴⁴ KSA: 12:9[3] = WP: 101.

⁴⁵ [W]eil sie alle den Gegensatzbegriff des Lebens, das Nichts, als Ziel, als höchstes Gut, als „Gott“ verherrlicht haben . . . , KSA: 13:14[25] = MT.

⁴⁶ Pascal (1995), #[418]/(233).

then one has lost comparatively little. Therefore, unless the probability of God's existence is infinitesimal, it is rational to adopt a theistic belief and a Christian way of life. This argument is the crux of Pascal's famous wager, which Nietzsche sees as further proof of Pascal's 'weak' scepticism since it has made him fearful of judgement as he "wanted to risk nothing and remained a Christian".⁴⁷

6.4 The Metaphysical: Pascal's Rejection of Reality and Embracing of Idealism

The third attribute of Pascal's decadence follows on directly from the second: for Nietzsche the very presentation of the kind of sceptical argument that forms the basis for Pascal's wager is indicative of a decadent rejection of reality and a wish to embrace 'idealism' instead:

[O]ur world is imperfect, evil and guilt are actual and determined and absolutely inherent in its nature; in which case it cannot be the *real* world: in which case knowledge is only the way to a denial of it, for the world is an error which can be known to be an error. This is the opinion of Schopenhauer on the basis of Kantian presuppositions. Pascal is even more desperate: he comprehended that, in that case, even knowledge must be corrupt and falsified—that *revelation* was needed even to understand that the world ought to be denied.⁴⁸

Furthermore, any hint of scepticism regarding the worth of earthly life is repugnant to Nietzsche, for it means one can never fulfil his ideal of life affirmation.

Pascal believed that by using the cogent argument of his wager, he could demonstrate to any rational individual that aspiring to attain Christian ideals such as ultimate salvation is a sensible gambit. Nietzsche never specifically assesses the wager's merits as an argument, although he evaluates it as a philosopher-psychologist and derides it on two counts. The first is that in a notebook entry he considers it to be founded on fear:

⁴⁷ KSA: 13:15[94] = WP: 929.

⁴⁸ KSA: 12:10[150] = WP: 411.

Even if Christian belief could not be disproved, Pascal, in view of a *dreadful* possibility that it might yet be true, considered it prudent in the highest sense to be a Christian.⁴⁹

For Nietzsche, to justify faith through the use of probability as Pascal does is a reaction born out of weakness based on a “dread of a menacing possibility”. The wager is an attempt to escape the agonising *possibility* that God does not exist, that merely seeks to reassure whilst actually assuring nothing. For Nietzsche – and despite Pascal’s assertions to the contrary – the wager displays a fear sustained by doubt and not by faith, since it can lead to a state of despair of having to live one’s life without God.⁵⁰ Moreover, in Nietzsche’s view fear by the weakest members of a community of their strong and rapacious neighbours, is what motivated the creation of a moral code that favours weakness and submission for all.⁵¹

However, it may be possible to counter Nietzsche and interpret Pascal’s argument as based on pleasure and not fear, for Pascal says “there is an infinity of infinitely happy life to be won”.⁵² Thus his wager could be seen to rest on the possibility of eternal happiness rather than on fear of eternal damnation. Yet, this interpretation would also be problematic for Nietzsche. For he discusses a “hedonistic turn”, where the motive for Christian belief – even if that belief turned out to be in error – has now become an equally crude desire for sustaining one’s life through the pleasure and tranquilising effects that such a belief might provide. For Nietzsche, this development merely shows “a symptom of decline”, the fading power of Christianity.⁵³

Nietzsche’s second objection, that Pascal put his faith in illusory ideals, can be found in a notebook entry headed as ‘Philosophy as decadence’. Here he exclaims, since any right-minded contemporary psychologists should strive for greatness of soul, that “[w]e are no Pascals”.⁵⁴ By this he means that one should abandon goals aimed at the attainment of illusory ideals, such as the

⁴⁹ KSA: 12:2[144] = *WLN*, pp. 89-90/*WP*: 240. See Birault (1988).

⁵⁰ KSA: 12:2[144] = *WLN*, pp. 89-90/*WP*: 240.

⁵¹ *BGE*: 201.

⁵² Pascal (1995), #[418]/(233).

⁵³ KSA: 12:2[144] = *WLN*, pp. 89-90/*WP*: 240.

⁵⁴ Philosophie als decadence, KSA: 13:14[28] = *MT/WP*: 426.

salvation of the soul,⁵⁵ striving for happiness, and virtue.⁵⁶ Any such attempts require the kind of introspection that he finds questionable as they reveal the weak constitution of the self-investigator's underlying instincts. He concludes that such behaviour is indicative of degeneration and, more specifically, "the expression of physiological contradictoriness" (*physiologischen Widersprüchlichkeit*), with detrimental effects for agency.⁵⁷ This brings me to what Nietzsche sees as perhaps the most profound effect of decadence: a lack of agency.

6.5 A Restricted Agency: Pascal's Extreme Asceticism

For Nietzsche, Pascal's embracing of Christianity makes him an unfree agent who fails to forge a will of his own. Rather for Nietzsche, Pascal becomes an advocate for an 'imposed will' by offering a new justification for its values, thereby forfeiting any chances of expressing and achieving a choice of his own:

Pascal's faith, which has the gruesome appearance of a protracted suicide of reason – a tough, long-lived, worm-like reason that cannot be killed all at once and with a single stroke. From the beginning, Christian faith has been sacrifice: sacrifice of all freedom, of all pride, of all self-confidence of the spirit; it is simultaneously enslavement and self-derision, self-mutilation.⁵⁸

What Nietzsche means by a prolonged "suicide of reason" is that it is not that Pascal no longer uses reason following his religious conversion, for his powers of reasoning are clearly far from diminished. Rather it is the case that Pascal no longer reasons freely – he is precisely like a decadent who is "not free to know".⁵⁹ Pascal is an apologist for Christianity who is primarily concerned with truth and he does not scrutinize the value of its ends, while for Nietzsche the value to one's life of a conception is as least as important as its truth. Although Pascal remains of a formidable intelligence, he uses it as the means of leading others to this end:

⁵⁵ EH: D, 2.

⁵⁶ KSA: 13:15[30] = WP: 765.

⁵⁷ KSA: 13:14[94] = WP: 435.

⁵⁸ BGE: 46.

⁵⁹ EH: BT, 2.

Pascal's principle '*il faut s'abêtir*' [*One must make oneself stupid*]. The result in psychological and moral terms: '*loss of self*', '*sanctification*', in physiological terms: hypnotization, – the attempt to achieve for man something akin to what *hibernation* is for some kinds of animal and *estivation* is for many plants in hot climates, a minimum of expenditure of energy and metabolism, where life can just about be maintained without actually entering consciousness.

To this end, an amazing amount of human energy has been expended – perhaps in vain? . . .⁶⁰

Whereas for Pascal it is necessary to appreciate the limitations of reason in order to make room for faith (as will be later for Kant), for Nietzsche this as a crucifixion of the intellect that is instrumental in the 'unselfing' process of self-abnegation that turns one away from living life.

Nietzsche speaks of a "hatred for the 'moi', of 'Pascalism'"⁶¹ which is an allusion to Pascal's phrase "The self is hateful".⁶² For Pascal the natural ego is hateful, which includes one's own as well as that of others. As a consequence the ego can only become loveable to itself and others as members of a mystical union with God: for "loving the body it loves itself, because it has no being except in the body, through the body, and for the body. *But he that is joined unto the Lord is one spirit.*"⁶³ Only loving the spirit animates the body, and we can love each member insofar as it participates in the body. Such a sentiment is for Nietzsche merely indicative of a despising of the embodied self, and makes a gross error in rejecting the actuality of its physiology for a transcendental reality as the means to attain a state of well-being and sanctification.

Nietzsche believes Pascal's penchant for reasoning to the point of absurdity – a proclivity also attributed to his fellow decadent Socrates⁶⁴ – results in the apologist's extreme form of asceticism, advocating the suppression of a person's most natural feelings and inclinations. For according to Pascal such emotions interfere with the practice of his and moreover, another person's faith. Pascal treated even his devoted sister with unusual excessive reserve because of his own self-imposed rule;

⁶⁰ *GM*: III, 17.

⁶¹ *KSA*: 12:10[125] = *WLN*, p. 195.

⁶² Pascal (1995), #[597]/(455).

⁶³ Pascal (1995), #[372]/(483).

⁶⁴ *TI*: Socrates, 10.

he would not show personal affection to anyone in order to prevent the other person feeling attached to him, because he believed attachment to a mortal being distracts the other person from the bond which he should have with God.⁶⁵

[A]ll man's natural instincts (to love, etc.) appear to him to be prohibited in themselves, and can regain their rights only once they've been *denied*, on the basis of obedience to God . . .

Pascal, Christianity's admirable *logician*, went as far as that! Consider his relationship to his sister, '*not making oneself loved*' seemed Christian to him.⁶⁶

Such conduct is clearly for Nietzsche a perverse display of Christianity's values of selflessness that portrays it to be good to be compassionate and self-sacrificing to suppress one's natural self, to feel guilty about one's instincts. In Nietzsche's view it is telling that:

Pascal tortured himself when he thought – [he] felt unegoistic . . . 'Selflessness' – that principle of decadence, the will to the end in art as in morality.⁶⁷

This is as close as Nietzsche gets to directly labelling Pascal as decadent.

6.6 Conclusion

Nietzsche's portrayal of Pascal as the epitome of a weakness inspired by Christianity, that eventually leads to his self-destruction is based on an analysis of what he regards as psychological expressions of a presumed underlying physiological weakness. As I have argued above, the principle examples of weaknesses are psychological self-deception and, epistemological pertaining to sceptical beliefs of the 'weak' variety based on doubt and fear. This in turn leads Pascal to reject reality and fervently embrace the ideals inherent to Christianity, with the result that his is the epitome of an unfree individual.

Indeed, such is the strength of the control that Christianity has over Pascal, Nietzsche credits him with the idea of intentionally trying to induce sickness in order to realise an impassioned belief in an ideal of perfection associated with one's eventual salvation:

⁶⁵ Pascal (1995), #[396]/(471).

⁶⁶ KSA: 12:10[128] = *WLN*, pp. 196-197/*WP*: 388.

⁶⁷ *NCW*: Antipodes.

[I]llness itself conceived as morally conditioned, perhaps as punishment or as testing or also as a state of salvation in which man becomes more perfect than he could be if he were healthy (– Pascal's idea); under certain circumstances, making oneself sick deliberately.⁶⁸

Nietzsche raises a related point when he links physiological conditions with depression,⁶⁹ and states that believing in ideals of atonement, redemption and salvation is just a systemized form of *folie circulaire* (bipolar affective disorder) to which people with a physiological weakness are susceptible.⁷⁰ Although Nietzsche does not explicitly connect this with Pascal, since Pascal is his archetypal Christian it could well be him who he has in mind in the following notebook entry:

[C]ritique of the religious man. He is *not* necessarily the moral man but the man of high peaks and deep depressions, who interprets the former with gratitude or suspicion and does not consider them to have issued from *himself* (– the same for the latter –). Essentially the man who feels 'unfree', who sublimates his states, his instincts of subjection.⁷¹

In Pascal's case, such associations do have some factual basis, though it is not clear if Nietzsche knew this or rather only diagnosed it from his writings. In a biography of Pascal, John Cole states that "the great man was what we would call a depressive", that this was the opinion of those closest to him, exhibiting in his last years in particular symptoms of depression and mood disorder that are indeed readily discernable in the *Pensées* as well as other traits.⁷² However, Immanuel Kant, who Nietzsche regards as another decadent⁷³ dominated by a theological instinct,⁷⁴ but one expressed incognito such that he is "an *underhanded* Christian, at the end of the day",⁷⁵ is also branded with this trait: "depressive habits (staying-at-home à la Kant . . .)".⁷⁶ This possibly shows that Nietzsche is applying

⁶⁸ KSA: 13:15[89] = WP: 227.

⁶⁹ A: 20.

⁷⁰ EH: Destiny, 8.

⁷¹ KSA: 12:7[3] = WLN, pp. 130-131/WP: 677.

⁷² Cole (1995), p. 211 & p. 231.

⁷³ A: 11 & TI: Reason, 6.

⁷⁴ A: 10 & KSA: 12:7[4] = WLN, p. 131/WP: 530.

⁷⁵ TI: Reason, 6.

⁷⁶ KSA: 13:14[83] = WP: 444. Kuehn (2001), p. 273, claims Kant remained in Königsberg all his life because of "the great role that socializing with his friends assumed in it. Kant was a very gregarious and social being — not so much the solitary, isolated, and somewhat comical figure that many have come to see in him."

all his distinguishing attributes of Pascal as a decadent Christian type, somewhat unfairly to those he considers to be just another instance.⁷⁷

As I hinted at earlier, what is significant is that much of the basis for Nietzsche's later analysis of Pascal as a decadent can be found in *Daybreak* and the corresponding notebooks, material which easily predates his explicit discussion of decadence. In these early works, aside from attacking Pascal over the morality of the hiddenness of God,⁷⁸ there are the first signs of Nietzsche's physiologically orientated interpretation.⁷⁹ I will end with one such passage that shows that despite all his criticism, Nietzsche did take Pascal seriously and used him to reflect critically on his own values:

Comparison with Pascal: do we not also have our strength in self-control, just as he? He is in favour of God, we in favour of honesty? Certainly, an ideal, to snatch men from the world and themselves, creates the most unheard-of tensions, a *continual deepest self-contradiction at its deepest*, a blissful rest *over oneself*, in the contempt of all that is called "I". We are less exasperated and also less revengeful against the world, our overall power is lower, but for this reason we do not burn down too quickly like candles, but have the power to endure.⁸⁰

⁷⁷ BGE: 56.

⁷⁸ A divine attribute Nietzsche considers dubious in that such a God would be grossly unjust.

⁷⁹ D: 91.

⁸⁰ Vergleich mit Pascal: haben *wir* nicht auch unsere Stärke in der Selbstbeziehung, wie er? Er zu Gunsten Gottes, wir zu Gunsten der Redlichkeit? Freilich: ein Ideal, die Menschen der Welt und sich selber entreißen, macht die unerhörtesten Spannungen, ist ein *fortgesetztes Sichwidersprechen im Tiefsten*, ein seliges Ausruhen *über sich*, in der Verachtung alles dessen, was „ich“ heißt. Wir sind weniger erbittert und auch weniger gegen die Welt voller Rache, unsere Kraft auf einmal ist geringer, dafür brennen wir auch nicht gleich Kerzen zu schnell ab, sondern haben die Kraft der Dauer. KSA: 9:7[262] = MT.

Chapter 7: Pyrrho and Epicurus – The Decadent Philosophers

7.1 Introduction

In his notebooks Nietzsche states that Greek philosophy by the time of Socrates is supposed to have already been in thrall to decadence,¹ and he goes as far as to pick Pyrrho as its highpoint.² Nietzsche evidently views Pyrrho to be such an exemplar of decadence, that in another entry he considered him to be on par with Socrates in a proposed exposition of philosophy as a decadent phenomenon.³ In another entry Pyrrho is cited as a specific example along with Epicurus: “Philosophy as decadence of the wise fatigued one. Pyrrho . . . Comparison with Epicurus.”⁴ Nietzsche, who was originally a trained classicist, does not say why he makes the comparison, but he repeats it in the same entry and gives us a clue: “Pyrrho, like Epicurus, two forms of Greek decadence.”⁵ Nietzsche seems to say that there are two different types of Greek decadence, which a few lines later he tells us both are “representing a state in which one is neither sick nor well, neither alive nor dead”. Both philosophers believed that philosophy was a way of life, effectively a practice seeking to attain a certain state referred to in the second part of the last quote. This I believe is a cryptic reference to a state of *ataraxia*, which is normally simply translated as ‘tranquillity’, though the true meaning is perhaps better captured as ‘freedom from disturbance’.⁶ If I am right, both philosophers would be classified as decadents according to Nietzsche because they aspire by different means to attaining the ideal of a state of serenity. For Pyrrho, this freedom from disturbance is accomplished through a sceptical withholding of judgement, and for Epicurus, by following a variety of ethical hedonism.

¹ KSA: 13:11[375] = *WLN*, pp. 237-238/*WP*: 427.

² KSA: 13:14[87].

³ KSA: 13:15[5].

⁴ Philosophie als *décadence* Die weise Müdigkeit. Pyrrho . . . Vergleich mit Epikur. KSA: 13:14[99] = *MT*. *Cf.*, *WP*: 437.

⁵ KSA: 13:14[99] = *WP*: 437.

⁶ Berry (2013), p. 102 and Vincenzo (1994), p. 392.

There is perhaps another reason for the comparison. We saw in Chapter 4.3.2 that decadence can manifest itself as scepticism along with nihilism,⁷ and Nietzsche explicitly associates Pyrrho with these two viewpoints.⁸ In his comparison of Pyrrho with Epicurus, Nietzsche regards the former as more nihilistic,⁹ thereby implying the latter is too, and regards both as practitioners of a sceptical attitude on the value of the world. For Nietzsche, Pyrrho is a closet Buddhist and Epicurus is a proto-crypto Christian, and their different philosophies reflect tenets of their distinctive underlying religious beliefs which have at least one thing in common: “The two belong together as nihilistic religions – they are religions of decadence”.¹⁰ These connections already make it clear that for Nietzsche Pyrrho’s and Epicurus’ sceptical tendencies are of the moral ‘weak’ variety, indicative of one of the four attributes of weakness. In the following discussion I will examine Nietzsche’s depiction of Pyrrho first against all of these attributes, followed by a less detailed discussion of Epicurus.

7.2 Pyrrho – Sceptic and Buddhist

Since Pyrrho wrote nothing, our understanding of him is derived from assorted ancient sources that have been subject to widely differing interpretations that I can only hint at here.¹¹ Nietzsche’s own comments about Pyrrho display a rather ambivalent attitude. He makes a back-handed compliment about Pyrrho, distinguishing him as the only original philosopher of antiquity after the pre-Socratics.¹² Nietzsche also gives him credit as the one thinker who through his sceptical practice, constituted the staunchest opposition to the perverting of Greek philosophy by dogmatism and its rigid defence of beliefs purporting to answer fundamental questions. For Nietzsche, Pyrrho was someone who managed to keep himself removed from such dogmatic debates.¹³ Evidently Nietzsche considered Pyrrho to be capable of showing good judgement as the inspiration for his philosophy is a

⁷ KSA: 13:14[86] = *WLN*, pp. 248-249/*WP*: 43.

⁸ KSA: 13:14[99] = *WP*: 437 & 13:15[58] = *WP*: 455, respectively.

⁹ KSA: 13:14[99] = *WP*: 437.

¹⁰ A: 20.

¹¹ See Svavarsson (2010), pp. 39-41 and Bett (2003), pp. 1-62.

¹² KSA: 13:14[100] = *WP*: 437.

¹³ KSA: 13:14[99] & 13:14[100] = *WP*: 437.

will to distinction – the ability to distinguish and discriminate. However, for Nietzsche, Pyrrho evidently grew weary by his principled struggle against dogmatism. He lost that very will of distinction by striving to free himself from belief, as we shall see below.¹⁴ I will begin my analysis of Pyrrho’s alleged decadence by examining what Nietzsche construes as evidence of his general psychological weakness.

7.2.1 The Psychological: Pyrrho’s Sagacious Weariness

What is central to Nietzsche’s portrayal of Pyrrho as a decadent is that the latter’s scepticism is inspired by a fundamental exhaustion, and is a case of the inability psychologically to resist the physiological-decadence that has enveloped him to the point of ‘giving-up’. The basis for this assessment is due to both Pyrrho’s ethical ideal of freedom from disturbance – *ataraxia* – and also his complete disengagement from any scientific aspirations.¹⁵ These two principles are also coupled with a general reticence and non-committal stance in offering any determinate explanation of the way things are:

Sagacious weariness: Pyrrho. To live a lowly life among the lowly. No pride. To live in the common way; to honor and believe what all believe. On guard against science and spirit, also against all that inflates . . . A Buddhist for Greece, grown up amid the tumult of the schools; a latecomer; weary; the protest of weariness against the zeal of the dialecticians; the unbelief of weariness in the importance of all things. He had seen Alexander, he had seen the Indian penitents. To such refined latecomers, everything lowly, everything poor, even everything idiotic is seductive. It has a narcotic effect . . . To overcome contradiction; no contest; no will to distinction; to deny the Greek instincts . . . To disguise wisdom so that it no longer distinguishes; to cloak it in poverty and rags; to perform the lowliest offices: to go to market

¹⁴ KSA: 13:14[100] = WP: 437.

¹⁵ KSA: 13:14[141] = WP: 442.

and sell suckling pigs— Sweetness; light; indifference; no virtues that require gestures: to be everyone's equal even in virtue: ultimate self-overcoming, ultimate indifference.¹⁶

Nietzsche associates Pyrrho's apparent weariness with Buddhism. For Nietzsche, Buddhism is the religion of the exhausted¹⁷ and like Christianity, a nihilistic and decadent religion,¹⁸ though preferable to it.¹⁹ In fact, Nietzsche describes Pyrrho as both a Greek Buddhist²⁰ as well as a nihilist a number of times.²¹ These two aspersions are connected because for Nietzsche, Buddhism is an example of passive nihilism²² which lacks the strength to create new values that is itself indicative of exhaustion and weakness due to a reduction of will to power.²³ Buddha – like Schopenhauer – remains “under the spell and delusion of morality”, and continues to evaluate life in moral terms by regarding existence as evil.²⁴ He shows himself to be a decadent by proposing a solution that in fact is life-negating and consists of non-existence that is referred to as *nirvāṇa*.²⁵

7.2.2 The Epistemological: Pyrrho's 'Weak' and 'Moralistic' Scepticism

Nietzsche believes that Pyrrho clearly demonstrates his psychological weakness in his manner of evaluating knowledge claims, as he holds that statements are neither true nor false because things are judged to be undecidable or indeterminate. For Pyrrho, since a belief could not be substantiated or embraced with certainty, it therefore had to be seen as unstable. A consequence of this lack of decidability or certainty was anxiety that acted as a source of human suffering and unhappiness. Pyrrho's practical means of liberation from this potential unrest, and the means to attain an inner peace of mind, was a life without belief based upon non-assertion. The latter is generally interpreted

¹⁶ KSA: 13:14[99] = WP: 437.

¹⁷ A: 22.

¹⁸ A: 19.

¹⁹ A: 42.

²⁰ KSA: 13:14[85], 13:14[87], 13:14[99] = WP: 437, 14[191] & 13:14[162]. Cf., KSA: 13:14[99].

²¹ KSA: 13:14[99] & 13:14[100] = WP: 437.

²² See Chapter 3.3.3.

²³ KSA: 13:14[174] = WLN, pp. 264-263/WP: 703.

²⁴ BGE: 56. Cf., A: 7.

²⁵ Nietzsche's general understanding of Buddhism has been questioned: “if Nietzsche had lived in an age where Buddhism was better understood, he might even have considered the Buddha to be such an *Übermensch*”, Morrison (1997), p. 225: Also: “Nietzsche believed the Buddha suffered from precisely that illness that he, Nietzsche had diagnosed, namely *décadence*. He therefore opposed his ethics of life-affirmation to the Buddha's presumed *decadent* ethics of life-negation. But Nietzsche was wrong in believing the former and therefore misguided in doing the latter”, Panaïoti (2013), p. 4.

as to make no definite claims about the nature of things or not to commit oneself in any way.²⁶ As a consequence, Pyrrho is said to have been completely indifferent to everything that went on around him, detached from the normal concerns of ordinary human beings and everyday reality. The aim of Pyrrho's scepticism was a way of life based on *ataraxia* as its ethical doctrine. One becomes tranquil and thereby happy if one embraces universal undecidability and indeterminacy, since you rid yourself of *all* beliefs and thereby of the concomitant anxiety.²⁷ This noncommittal stance of Pyrrho is the basis for the suspension of judgement – *epochē* – the sceptical practice when confronted with the undecidability of opposing positions attributed to his subsequent followers the Pyrrhonists.²⁸

Putting aside any contentious issues of the exact nature of Pyrrho's scepticism and route to tranquillity, all we need to note for our discussion is that Nietzsche clearly does associate "the demand for unbelief . . . the need to get free from a belief"²⁹ with Pyrrho. This need accounts for the latter's "protest of weariness against the zeal of the dialecticians; unbelief of weariness in the importance of all things".³⁰ An obvious objection to this kind of stance is that without belief one cannot act, a view sustained by the anecdote that Pyrrho required constant support from companions in order to save him from natural dangers he did not believe in.³¹ Likewise for Nietzsche, any disposition to avoid asserting beliefs or to suspend judgement is one that is potentially dangerous to life, a sign of an unhealthy yearning not to engage with the world that conforms to his weak form of scepticism. He construes unbelief as symptomatic of debility and withdrawal and as a sign of someone uneasy with their place in the world or possibly existence itself.³² This uneasiness in turn requires an escape and respite from the harshness of reality as a search for happiness.³³

²⁶ Bett (2003), pp. 36-39.

²⁷ A more limited interpretation of the texts confines the scope to refrain from making any positive beliefs about good and bad as the way to shed anxiety, Svavarsson (2015), p. 198.

²⁸ Berry (2013), p. 102. Bett (2003), p. 14 & p. 39, and Bett (2013), p. 115, suggests that Pyrrho's actual position was significantly different from the sceptical outlook of the latter Pyrrhonism, and that Pyrrho did not in fact adopt the later Pyrrhonist attitude of *epochē*, a suspension of judgement. Svavarsson (2010), pp. 35-57, argues that Pyrrho's principal philosophical attitudes were more of a metaphysical than an epistemological character. However, Nietzsche appears to have associated Pyrrho with the conventional portrayal.

²⁹ KSA: 13:15[58] = WP: 455.

³⁰ KSA: 13:14[99] = WP: 437.

³¹ Mitcheson (2017), p. 68.

³² BGE: 207. Cf., GS: 112, A: 49 & KSA: 11:40[61] = WLN, p. 46.

³³ KSA: 13:14[92] = WP: 433.

As his interest in decadence grew, Nietzsche developed the view that no scepticism has arisen without an ulterior motive, one that is actually of greater importance than the underlying doubt. This ulterior motive has primarily been moral and arises from a pessimistic reservation or disappointment about the real value of something formerly revered.³⁴ According to Nietzsche, this “moralistic scepticism” (*die moralistische Sceptis*) that he associates also with the argument for faith of Pascal’s wager as discussed in Chapter 6.3,³⁵ is a pivotal requirement in the emergence of nihilism, which, in an extreme form, supposes that there is no value in the world. This nihilism is, Nietzsche concludes, “a result of the moral interpretation of the world”.³⁶ Nietzsche therefore suspects that even Pyrrho – as with Socrates, Epicurus and others – is engaged in a struggle against knowledge that is being fought in favour of morality.³⁷ In his analysis of the sceptics of antiquity, Nietzsche concludes that morality remained the highest value for them. Like all philosophies, scepticism has a moral origin or aim based on a questioning of the worth of this world, and eventually leads to the construction of ideal – ultimately depraved *qua* revengeful – counter-worlds. Nietzsche concludes then that all philosophers are therefore decadents:

Morality as the supreme value, in all phases of philosophy (even among the skeptics). Result: this world is good for nothing, there must be a "real world." What really determines the supreme value here? What is morality really? The instinct of decadence; it is the exhausted and disinherited who in this way take their revenge and play the master. . . .³⁸

Nietzsche’s reference to a ‘real world’ in this passage already hints at the fact that Pyrrho also meets the next characteristic of decadence: the decadent’s predilection for the metaphysical and ‘idealism’.

³⁴ KSA: 12:2[161] = WP: 410.

³⁵ KSA: 12:9[3] = WP: 101.

³⁶ Nihilismus als Folge der moralischen Welt-Auslegung. KSA: 12:7[43] = MT.

³⁷ KSA: 13:14[141] = WP: 442.

³⁸ KSA: 13:14[137] = WP: 401.

7.2.3 The Metaphysical: Pyrrho's Rejection of Reality and Embracing of Idealism

According to Nietzsche, the 'weak' sceptical attitude that questions the value of the world betrays an element of morality within it that does not refer to just any system of values, but rather specifically to values of a life-denying or world-denying nature. This practical or psychological need for such values is what distinguishes decadents from non-decadents, and it is present in Pyrrho's ethical ideal of freedom from disturbance – *ataraxia*. Nietzsche generally correlates these life and world denying values with the ascetic ideal, and especially with Christianity, where the individual's self-worth is diminished. For behind the latter is the same desire to deny reality or devalue the everyday world of experience, and conceive of an ideal 'real world' that lies beyond it instead. Anyone who suspends judgement about it is as abhorrent as the person who purports to have knowledge of the nature of such a world. Such a person exhibits a greater degree of denial and detachment from healthy instincts, for they refrain from making their own judgment – through *epoché* – by being subjected to the herd instinct and choose to live like the common man:

"One must act; *consequently rules* of conduct are needed"—said even the skeptics of antiquity. The urgent need for a decision as an argument for considering something *true*! "One must *not* act"—said their more consistent brothers, the Buddhists, and conceived a rule of conduct to liberate one from actions— To accommodate oneself, to live as the "common man" lives, to hold right and good what *he* holds right: this is to submit to the herd instinct. One must take one's courage and severity so far as to feel such a submission as a *disgrace*. Not to live with two different standards!— Not to separate theory and practice!—³⁹

For Nietzsche, Pyrrho's profound weariness unwittingly causes him to relapse by pursuing what is essentially an ascetic ideal, advocating values that require one to live a life of conformity. Hence, Pyrrho's exhausted will and subsequent refusal to believe anything actually manifests into a life that corresponds to what 'the herd' believes. Moreover, just as the need for the certainty of belief has

³⁹ KSA: 13:14[107] = WP: 458.

been confused with 'will to truth', the same has occurred for those of the opposite yearning and who eschew belief in the first place:

Psychological confusions:—the demand for belief—confused with the "will to truth" . . . But in the same way, the demand for unbelief has been confused with the "will to truth" (—the need to get free from a belief, for a hundred reasons: to be in the right against some "believers"). What inspires the skeptic? *Hatred* of the dogmatist—or a need for rest, a weariness, as in the case of Pyrrho.⁴⁰

What Nietzsche means here by the will to truth is an overriding commitment to knowing the truth about those aspects of our lives that affect us most deeply. This is so even if this commitment detracts from our real self-interest, such that truth becomes an end that is preferred to other ends and develops into the overriding value.⁴¹ Nietzsche considers the will to truth as a moral commitment that he criticises. This moral commitment he believes provides relief from the anxiety the weak – most of us – experience in the face of the meaninglessness of human suffering. As such then, the will to truth functions in much the same way as Christian ascetic commitments, in that it can restrict one's agency as we shall see next.

7.2.4 A Restricted Agency: Pyrrho's Fanaticism

Nietzsche's ascription of idealism to Pyrrho, together with a perceived lack of agency, can be traced to the sole published reference about Pyrrho, a 1879 passage entitled 'The fanatic of mistrust and his warranty' from *The Wanderer and His Shadow*.⁴² Despite this book being composed well before Nietzsche's explicit interest in decadence, this passage can be interpreted as already showing his negative assessment of Pyrrho based on decadent principles. In a rather cryptic depiction of an imaginary dialogue between Pyrrho and an interlocutor, Nietzsche portrays Pyrrho's persona as one of a fanatic (*ein Fanatiker*). For Nietzsche, a fanatic is so utterly committed to an ideal that he not

⁴⁰ KSA: 13:15[58] = WP: 455.

⁴¹ GS: 344.

⁴² WS: 213.

only persistently believes in it despite all evidence to the contrary, but relentlessly strives to impose his passionate belief on all others. Indeed, in his view, Pyrrho will only acknowledge others' acceptance and devotion to his cause when they practise it with the same degree of fervour and zeal as himself. For the later Nietzsche, fanatics are "the antithesis of strong spirits who have become *free*."⁴³ Hence his presentation of Pyrrho as an early example of someone who foists an 'unfree' or 'alien' will on others – again we encounter a critique of 'imposed willing' as discussed in Chapter 4.5.2. As Nietzsche holds that there are many different perspectives on the world, each is indicative of some need, emotion or interest,⁴⁴ such a pre-defined and narrow outlook is just one example of many types of 'fanaticism' (*Fanatismus/Fanatism*).⁴⁵ Fanaticism is further symptomatic of an unfree, weak-willed person who lacks the courage to live in a world of uncertainty, and prefers to believe in a ready-made solutions and a single point of view.⁴⁶ Driven by a hatred of dogmatism, Pyrrho is just such a case. Despite his assertion that nothing can be known, he not only fervently *believes* in the avoidance of belief, but is also a rabid advocate of his own philosophy that ironically could be conceived as a negative kind of dogmatism. Such fanaticism about belief and happiness betrays the pathological nature of its veiled cause, that of decadence.⁴⁷

Scepticism for Nietzsche is a practical undertaking that has effects on those who engage in it, and in its strong and active form, is for him a central part of a cure for the malaise of modernity. For Nietzsche, we need to explore and question our drives and instincts,⁴⁸ in order to assist in effectuating change that promotes life through the revaluation of values and the creation of new

⁴³ A: 54.

⁴⁴ GS: 344.

⁴⁵ Examples are: "The fanaticism with which all of Greek thought threw itself on rationality", *TI*: Socrates, 10, and Kant "with his "practical reason" and his moral fanaticism", *KSA*: 12:9[178] = *WP*: 95. *Cf.*, *KSA*: 12:10[11] = *WLN*, p. 176/*WP*: 888 & 12:10[118] = *WP*: 382. By contrast, the 'ex-decadent' Nietzsche claims: "you won't find a single trace of fanaticism in my character", *EH*: *Clever*, 10. A: 54, lists Girolamo Savonarola, Martin Luther, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Maximilien Robespierre and Henri de Saint-Simon as fanatics.

⁴⁵ GS: 347.

⁴⁶ GS: 347.

⁴⁷ *KSA*: 13:14[92] = *WP*: 433.

⁴⁸ Stern (2015) challenges the extent that this is possible according to Nietzsche's own restrictions on what knowledge we can have of our drives and instincts.

ones.⁴⁹ However, the Pyrrhonian kind of scepticism is simply not radical enough for Nietzsche. For Pyrrhonian scepticism does not sufficiently question the beliefs and values that are at the basis of our actions and existence, and consequently it is ineffectual for establishing a new approach for living authentically. For these reasons Nietzsche would not accept a Pyrrhonian suspension of judgement.⁵⁰

For Nietzsche then, we cannot be totally sceptical if living involves valuing and acting out a life in a different way to one proscribed by an ascetic ideal for example, or some external authority that shares an absolute faith in an absolute value.⁵¹ Moreover, he believes that in order to flourish requires experimenting with alternative values.⁵² To be a ‘strong’ sceptic one must overcome any need for absolute ideals. Whereas the ‘weak’ scepticism of a fanatic like Pyrrho takes the values they hold to be universal and permanent, rather than personal values they must affirm as their own. The latter kind of values should be indicative of a self-awareness that concedes the inevitability of evaluations stemming from ourselves, including our bodily drives and instincts.⁵³ These are expressed in our actions and can therefore be discerned externally. Moreover, the fanatic lacks a personal honesty founded on an intellectual conscience that involves a continuous self-examination.⁵⁴ In which case such an approach is the antithesis of Nietzsche’s belief that the attainment of free agency is reflected in the agent’s striving for the “power of self-determination, a *freedom* of the will, in which the spirit takes leave of all faith and every wish for certainty.”⁵⁵

For Nietzsche, we must maintain our freedom from conviction, and not be like most thinkers who are guilty of failing to exhibit a certain degree of critical detachment.⁵⁶ To practise philosophy properly requires the ability to be a skilful reader – not just of texts, but also of people and the world

⁴⁹ BGE: 211 & A: 11.

⁵⁰ Mitcheson (2017), p. 70, argues this rejection is central in showing just how different Nietzsche’s ‘strong’ kind of scepticism is from the ‘weak’ variety, and thereby refutes the argument of Berry (2011), pp. 24-25, that Nietzsche’s scepticism shows substantial similarities to the Pyrrhonian variety.

⁵¹ GM: Preface, 5.

⁵² BGE: 253.

⁵³ See Richardson (2013), p. 767. He distinguishes between ‘body values’ and ‘agent values’.

⁵⁴ GS: 335.

⁵⁵ GS: 347.

⁵⁶ A: 54.

around us – approaching them with precisely the skills appropriate to the philologist and philosopher-psychologist. In what we could call Nietzsche’s scepticism for the strong, *ephexis* – a stopping or checking – is a principle of philological interpretation that is not envisioned to make perspectives absolute, but neither is it a Pyrrhonian suspension of one’s own decision.⁵⁷ It will always be the case that we will be presented with a number of possible candidates for belief, and these give rise to a need to evaluate both our existing and potential new beliefs. One must decide which of those are plainly not true or are just mere convictions by examining the evidence, and recognising that employing the best techniques at our disposal need not involve completely rejecting a belief. Ancient sceptics like Pyrrho deliberately abstained from constructing visions, and thereby laid bare their weakened fettle. For Nietzsche, their scepticism did not go far enough and as a result they don’t come close to his ideal of the value-creating free spirit.

7.2.5 A Brief Evaluation of Nietzsche’s Portrayal of Pyrrho

What immediately strikes one as suspicious about Nietzsche’s portrayal of Pyrrho are his attempts – both published and unpublished – to portray him as a kind of fanatic. This grates with his stated persona of “[s]imple: indescribably patient, carefree, mild” and his declared therapeutic aim of freeing himself and others from belief and the spell of dogmatism.⁵⁸ Then there is Nietzsche’s assertion that Pyrrho’s weariness and decadence lead him to withdraw unassumingly into humble conformism:

To live a lowly life among the lowly. No pride. To live in the common way; to honor and believe what all believe . . . to cloak it in poverty and rags; to perform the lowliest offices: to go to market and sell suckling pigs . . .⁵⁹

This quirky depiction seems to be at odds with conformity as it clashed with the prevailing ethos, and Pyrrho’s behaviour was considered too eccentric and uncommon for someone of his reputed

⁵⁷ A: 52.

⁵⁸ KSA: 13:14[99] = WP: 437.

⁵⁹ KSA: 13:14[99] = WP: 437.

social status.⁶⁰ It is also debatable whether Pyrrho should be deemed a philosopher – and thereby an implicit decadent in Nietzsche's eyes – as some commentators have raised the possibility that he was more of an unsystematic moral sage.⁶¹ Pierre Lamarche, for example, argues that "he most definitely was not" a philosopher. Instead Pyrrho habituated himself to a particular *agoge* – a way of life – that suited him rather than proposing ideals or manifesting a will to truth or wisdom.⁶² Nietzsche does actually hint at this kind of portrayal himself in another notebook entry that discusses the perils of employing reason to claim that virtue is the way to happiness:

Pyrrho, judged as everyone did, namely that in goodness and integrity "little people" were far superior to philosophers. All the more profound natures of antiquity were disgusted with the philosophers of virtue: they were looked upon as quarrelsome and play actors.⁶³

In light of the above, it is not surprising that Nietzsche's portrayal of Pyrrho has attracted some criticism by a number of commentators. Lamarche, for instance, argues that it is questionable that Nietzsche should depict Pyrrho as weak and suffering from an emasculation of the philosophical will to distinction, the ability to distinguish and discriminate.⁶⁴ Nietzsche is confusing Pyrrho's impressive ability to remain indifferent and unfazed by the flux of experience – which shows a consummate power of discrimination – with a weakening of the will to distinction. After all he appears to contradict himself concerning Pyrrho's indifference or impassivity (*adiaphoria*) when, in a notebook entry entitled 'On the hygiene of the "weak"', he says:

A strong nature manifests itself by waiting and postponing any reaction: it is as much characterized by a certain *adiaphoria* as weakness is by an involuntary countermovement and the suddenness and inevitability of "action."– The will is weak and the prescription to avoid stupidities would be to have a strong will and to do *nothing*.– *Contradictio*.– A kind of self-

⁶⁰ Svavarsson (2010), pp. 39-41.

⁶¹ Svavarsson (2010), p. 37.

⁶² Lamarche (2008), p. 171.

⁶³ KSA: 13:14[129] = WP: 434.

⁶⁴ Lamarche (2008), p. 171.

destruction; the instinct of preservation is compromised.— The weak harm themselves.— That is the type of decadence.— In fact, we find a tremendous amount of reflection about practices that would lead to impassability. The instinct is on the right track insofar as doing nothing is more expedient than doing something.— All the practices of the orders, the solitary philosophers, the fakirs are inspired by the right value standard that a certain kind of man cannot benefit himself more than by preventing himself as much as possible from acting.—⁶⁵

On the contrary then, in Lamarche's eyes, Pyrrho characterises the height of the will to distinction. When compared with the dogmatists for whom their adherence to dogma means that they must habitually strive to grasp and react to everything until they are unable to distinguish and let go, Pyrrho shows an impressive resolve to discriminate yet remain indifferent. Nothing moves him other than that through which he sustains his ataractic way of life. Arguably, then, Pyrrho exhibits such an impressive capacity for indifference that his behaviour is then interpreted as "indescribably patient, carefree, mild".⁶⁶ This penchant for indifference would then be irreconcilable with an emasculation of the will to distinction.

Adrian Kuzminski contends that when Nietzsche stresses Pyrrho's alleged weariness and indifference that associates him with both Buddhism and a negative dogmatism, this is in fact more characteristic of the Academics rather than the Pyrrhonists. Kuzminski persuasively argues that despite Nietzsche's philological expertise and knowledge he was mistaken respectively on two matters.⁶⁷ First, whilst discussing the decadent's instinctive actions, he mentions "Pyrrhonic opponents of dialectics and of knowability in general", but passes over the opportunity to examine the practice of the suspension of judgement.⁶⁸ Instead he prefers to focus on Pyrrho's opposition to dialectics and Socrates, claiming his life was effectively one large protest against the latter's principle

⁶⁵ KSA: 13:14[102] = WP: 45.

⁶⁶ KSA: 13:14[99] = WP: 437.

⁶⁷ Kuzminski (2008), p. 16.

⁶⁸ KSA: 13:14[142] = WP: 423.

of happiness = virtue = knowledge.⁶⁹ Secondly, Nietzsche is mistaken about his charge of Pyrrho as a nihilist, for a nihilist would be expected to abandon any notion of happiness, rather than hold it as a goal of attainment. Arguably, Pyrrho and his followers reject dialectics, wisdom, or science *per se*; rather they reject only the pseudo-wisdom of beliefs and leave open the door to other possibilities. For them, science should determine the evident correlations among appearances and in this way become an extension of ordinary life in observing and grasping such correlations. Science, thus understood, would only strive to preclude non-evident beliefs that warp and confuse our understanding of experience.

As I have tried to show, Nietzsche clearly interprets Pyrrho as a decadent who exhibits all of our four criteria. Nietzsche could be seen as disregarding countervailing evidence, in his attempt to confirm (rather than disconfirm) his hypothesis of decadence, an issue to which I will return at the end. I will now briefly turn to that other form of Greek decadence that Nietzsche sees embodied in Epicurus' ethical hedonism.

7.3 Epicurus – Ethical Hedonist and Proto-Christian

After Socrates and Plato, there are more references to Epicurus in Nietzsche's oeuvre than any other ancient philosopher. Overall they paint an evolving picture, from admiration where he describes Epicurus as "one of the greatest of men, the inventor of a heroic-idyllic mode of philosophizing",⁷⁰ to one of branding him "a *typical* decadent". The latter remark is made – in spite of a prior one that acknowledges Epicurus' "strong dose of Greek vitality and nerves" – due to his zealous promotion of a hedonism that fears pain, which Nietzsche regards as essentially "a *religion of love*".⁷¹ His portrayal of Epicurus then is, as I want to briefly show, akin to that of Pyrrho in its ambivalence. For Nietzsche envisaged Epicurus to be someone like himself, in that he was bent on toppling the pernicious effects of the ideals of Platonism, and seeking to attempt to cure humanity of its "*spirit for*

⁶⁹ KSA: 13:14[99] = WP: 437.

⁷⁰ WS: 295.

⁷¹ A: 30.

revenge".⁷² With the exclamation "[a]nd Epicurus triumphs anew!", Nietzsche also endorses Epicurus' worldliness, which strove to redirect attention from the prevailing abstract metaphysical considerations of immortality toward the concerns of mortal life.⁷³

As one would expect, the later Nietzsche's interest in decadence seems to change his earlier positive perception of Epicurus, although not entirely.⁷⁴ He still praises Epicurus and his followers' belief that philosophy is a practice whose primary function is to heal the soul, and that "they rejected the search for truth with irony; "Philosophy as an art of *living*."⁷⁵ The beginning of Nietzsche's doubts can be traced to at least 1883, although his regard for Epicurus was still high at times, stating in one notebook entry: "Types, *how* the Overhuman must *live*; as an Epicurean god."⁷⁶ Yet in another entry written around the same period – and which predates his explicit interest in decadence – Nietzsche portrays Epicurus as advocating that life has a final purpose that consisted in the attainment of (a refashioned variant of) *ataraxia*:

For *Epicurus* everything depends on the *correct weighing* of pleasure against displeasure: consequently φρόνησις [*Phronesis*]⁷⁷ is the main virtue, the foundation: *prudence-morality*. The significance of sensual pleasure is to free us from desires and needs that disturb the soul's ἀταραξία [*ataraxia*]. Happiness as the *final purpose of the individual life*. Aristotle and All! So it is the domination of the *concept of purpose*, which has so far spoiled all moralists. "There must be a 'why' of life!" That even the *rational, conscious life belongs* to the development of *purposeless life* – ego.⁷⁸

⁷² Z: II, Redemption.

⁷³ D: 72.

⁷⁴ Young (2010), p. 278 claims around 1879 Nietzsche developed "an ever-increasing affection for, and sense of affinity with . . . Epicurus", just as his health or 'decadence' reached its nadir, and this may partially explain Nietzsche's subsequent volte-face.

⁷⁵ KSA: 12:9[57] = WP: 449.

⁷⁶ Typus, *wie* der Übermensch *leben* muß, wie ein Epicurischer Gott. KSA: 10:16[85] = MT.

⁷⁷ A kind of wisdom relevant to practical matters which requires an ability to discern how or why to act virtuously, to encourage practical virtue and excellence of character in others.

⁷⁸ Bei *Epicur* kommt alles auf das *richtige Abwägen* von Lust gegen Unlust an: folglich ist φρόνησις die Haupttugend, das Fundament: *Klugheits-Moral*. Die Bedeutung der sinnlichen Lust ist, uns von Begierden und Bedürfnissen zu befreien, welche die ἀταραξία der Seele stören. Glückseligkeit als *Endzweck des Einzel Lebens*. Aristoteles und Alle! Also es ist die *Herrschaft des Zweckbegriffs*, die alle Moralisten bisher verdorben hat. „Es muß doch ein ‚Wozu?‘ des Lebens geben!“ Daß auch das *vernünftige bewußte Leben hinein gehört* in die Entwicklung des *zwecklosen Lebens* — ego. KSA: 10:7[209] = MT.

From this point onward, Nietzsche's opinion of Epicurus changes. While Epicurus does indeed reject Platonism and dispenses with ideal forms and immortal souls, he nevertheless remains dependent, like "all moralists", on finding some ultimate purpose for life. Unlike Nietzsche, who states his own view in the final sentence, Epicurus allegedly cannot fathom that overall life does not have any such final end and meaning, and is "purposeless". Nietzsche's evolving depiction eventually develops into a critique of Epicurus couched in all the characteristic weaknesses of a decadent. Nietzsche comes to view Epicurus as psychologically weak, a proponent of a world-weary ethical hedonism that reflects a desire to put an end to suffering (out of fear or pain) for "he who suffers most and is poorest in life would need mainly mildness, peacefulness, goodness in thought and in deed".⁷⁹

According to Nietzsche, the second characteristic weakness is discernable in Epicurus' sceptical manner of assessing knowledge claims. In the notebook entry entitled 'Moral values even in theory of knowledge', Epicurus is named along with fellow decadents Kant, Plato, Socrates and Pascal, as someone who "denied the possibility of knowledge, in order to retain moral (or hedonistic) values as the highest values".⁸⁰ Nietzsche therefore seems to be ascribing this 'typical' decadent with the usual accompanying trait of being a 'moralistic' sceptic. As we saw from the passage above, Epicurus is seen as someone who partakes in a moral evaluation of the world that he eventually finds to be worthless – the kind of scepticism that is for Nietzsche's of the 'weak' variety. This epistemological weakness – which is also extended to encompass science as well as we shall see below – is implicit in the third characteristic weakness pertaining to the metaphysical.

Nietzsche's contention that Epicurus also displays a weakness in his metaphysical commitments is somewhat ironic considering he lauds his apparent distaste for Platonism. Nevertheless, he construes Epicurus as advocating a flight from reality out of weakness in dealing with the uncertainty of a terrifying and perplexing world.⁸¹ Just as "Plato is a coward in the face of

⁷⁹ GS: 370. Cf., NCW: Antipodes.

⁸⁰ KSA: 12:9[160] = WP: 578.

⁸¹ BGE: 7.

reality”,⁸² Nietzsche claims Epicurus possesses “[t]he instinct of hatred for reality” in his quest to avoid pain and suffering.⁸³ He is driven by an “atomistic need”,⁸⁴ a dominant will that craves the formation and maintenance of states of equilibrium that is akin to the more celebrated “metaphysical need” discussed in Chapter 4.4.1.⁸⁵ In the process Epicurus fails to affirm the questionable and tragic facets of this world as anyone invigorated by Nietzsche’s Dionysian pessimism of strength would and as discussed in Chapter 2.5.3. In fact he has more in common with a Christian, “who really is simply a kind of Epicurean who follows the principle of hedonism *as far as possible*”.⁸⁶ For Nietzsche, both display a form of ‘romantic’ or Schopenhauerian pessimism of weakness that Nietzsche interprets as a form of withdrawal from this world.⁸⁷

Disparaging comments like the above are linked to Nietzsche’s charge of Epicurus’ epistemological weakness. His accusation of being a ‘weak’ and ‘moralistic’ sceptic is itself centred upon the problem of the primacy of the hedonistic values of pleasure and displeasure within Epicurus’ philosophy. Nietzsche is suspicious of, and disagrees with the centrality of these valuations, as he states that “[w]herever the hedonistic perspective comes into the foreground one may infer suffering and a type that represents a failure”.⁸⁸ This failure refers to his view that hedonism, too, is a symptom of decline⁸⁹ and a typical form of decadence.⁹⁰ He goes even further and construes hedonism as indicative of an onset of nihilism:

The "predominance of suffering over pleasure" or the opposite (*hedonism*): these two doctrines are already signposts to nihilism. For in both of these cases no ultimate meaning is posited except the appearance of pleasure or displeasure.⁹¹

⁸² *TI*: Ancients, 2. See Chapter 4.4.2.

⁸³ *A*: 30.

⁸⁴ *BGE*: 12.

⁸⁵ *HH*: I, 26, 37 & 151, *GS*: 151 & *EH*: HH, 6.

⁸⁶ *NCW*: Antipodes. *Cf.*, *GS*: 370.

⁸⁷ *GS*: 370. *Cf.*, *NCW*: Antipodes.

⁸⁸ *KSA*: 12:10[127] = *WLN*, p. 196/*WP*: 781.

⁸⁹ *KSA*: 12:2[144] = *WLN*, pp. 89-90/*WP*: 240.

⁹⁰ *KSA*: 13:14[94] = *WP*: 435.

⁹¹ *KSA*: 12:9[107] = *WP*: 35.

A difficult interpretive question arises here. As we have seen, often Nietzsche is critical of advocating some 'ultimate meaning'. Here he seems to hold the opposite view. I believe what he criticizes here is this: when the values of pleasure and displeasure are posited as those of the highest kind, such that they become the *raison d'être* of one's life, then for Nietzsche, doubts have been cast about life's worth; or at best, doubt about a willingness to engage in and value the entirety of one's life including all the experiences – good and bad – which encompasses it.

This association by Nietzsche of hedonism and nihilism has yet another dimension. Since Epicurus and his school of disciples met in his garden, Nietzsche euphemistically portrays this assembly as the forerunner of the Christian ideal of Paradise: "As decadence: pendant to 'epicureanism' – Paradise, as conceived by the Greeks".⁹² The garden is similar to Paradise in being a gathering place for those who view the highest good in the absence of suffering – hence an abode for the nihilistic.⁹³ Epicurus' embracement of the ideal of *ataraxia* is a detachment from reality through self-sufficiency and is one of the two constituents of *eudaimonia*, i.e. happiness or flourishing. The other constituent is an absence of pain and avoidance of insufferable stimulation. For Nietzsche, together these integral aspirations express an inability to accept and engage with one's drives and their embodiment in the world in the same manner as Pyrrho. Epicurean withdrawal in pursuit of tranquillity, driven by weakness, shows the incapacity to own one's passions. This divests the Epicurean of the very internal influences required for creation and testing of new values. This explains why Nietzsche plainly asserts that he is against "Epicurean happiness and against all relaxation in contemplative states."⁹⁴

Finally, a further attribute of weakness then is that for Nietzsche, Epicurus, too, is evidently too weak have a 'free will'. In a notebook entry he repeats his charge of a sceptical weakness concerning knowledge claims, which he then extends to encompass science as well. Here he

⁹² KSA: 13:11[365] = WP: 225.

⁹³ BGE: 7.

⁹⁴ KSA: 12:1[123] = WP: 911.

reiterates that such a stance belies the tyranny of an ‘imposed will’ – an inability and unwillingness to forge a will of one’s own and attain one’s freedom:

We find from the beginning of Greek philosophy onwards a struggle against science with the means of an epistemology or skepticism: and with what object? Always for the good of *morality* . . . Socrates, Aristippus, the Megarian school, the Cynics, Epicurus, Pyrrho—a general assault on knowledge for the good of morality . . . What were they really defending themselves against? Against obligation, against legality, against the compulsion to go hand in hand— I believe one calls this *freedom*— Decadence manifests itself in this: the instinct of solidarity is so degenerate that solidarity is felt as tyranny . . .⁹⁵

By contrast, the aspiration of the dwellers of ‘the garden’ is a different kind of freedom – Presses Universitaires de France the ideal of freedom from disturbance – where the greatest good is to seek modest pleasures in order to attain *ataraxia* and put an end to fear of suffering. This longing for a serene calmness and absence of disturbance from body and mind is, according to Nietzsche, identical in form to the Christian Sabbath of ultimate rest.⁹⁶ Nietzsche states that the “*calm of strength*”, where the individual embraces stimulation because she has the ability to refrain from reacting, is often confounded for the sedative properties of the “*calm of exhaustion*”. Despite claims of attaining “a divine state” through the ‘calm of strength’, ascetic philosophical practices in fact actually aim for a ‘calm of exhaustion’, which is in Nietzsche’s view really a calm of weakness.⁹⁷

For Nietzsche, the common denominator of Epicureanism and Christianity is a propensity by the weary and exhausted to recoil from the suffering of this world for the want of tranquillity. Where the desire for pleasure and an absence of suffering are in fact “the two *physiological realities* on which, out of which, the doctrine of redemption has grown”,⁹⁸ just as all nihilistic religions

⁹⁵ KSA: 13:14[141] = WP: 442. I take Nietzsche to be sarcastic here when he criticises the connection people commonly make between obligation, legality, solidarity, and ‘freedom’.

⁹⁶ GM: III, 6.

⁹⁷ KSA: 13:14[65] = WP: 47.

⁹⁸ A: 30.

identify nothingness with God.⁹⁹ For Nietzsche, as we saw in Chapter 4.2.2, motivation displaying the ability to resist and not ‘give in’ are key properties of an intact will to power. Yet Epicurus posits the absence of resistance as a higher value. Nietzsche interprets the quest for *ataraxia* as effectively a means of minimizing or even annihilating resistance.

7.3.1 A Brief Evaluation of Nietzsche’s Portrayal of Epicurus

While one commentator, Marcin Milkowski, claims that the “Nietzschean interpretation of Epicurus does not differ strongly from what we know about that Greek philosopher”, I believe it is contentious and undermines his portrayal of Epicurus as a decadent in three ways.¹⁰⁰ The first problem is that Nietzsche’s portrayal appears to be inconsistent. He makes a connection between Epicurus and Christianity, but at the same time he also claims that Epicurus is the original detractor of an underlying, pre-existing form of Christianity¹⁰¹ that accompanied the rise of the “[m]oral fanaticism” of Platonism.¹⁰² The latter assertion is founded upon Epicurus’ dismissal of the immortality of the soul, all notions of guilt before a divinity, along with any punishment in a hereafter.

The second problem is Nietzsche’s depiction of Epicurus’ quest for *ataraxia*. Joseph Vincenzo for example persuasively argues that the attainment of *ataraxia* is the feeling of freedom from any mental or physical disturbances, and a state where maximum pleasure is experienced.¹⁰³ According to Vincenzo, for Epicurus the state of *ataraxia* is one of pleasure, when the active forces of a life are freed from the reactive force of desire that arises automatically once the necessary and natural desires are met. So whereas Nietzsche portrays the attainment of a balanced state as through an anaesthetic that reflects weakness, Vincenzo argues that it can be conceived as one of strength. The result is a state of composure, untroubled by stimuli and desire in which one becomes like the gods, such that *ataraxia* could be seen as closer to Nietzsche’s demands for a deliverance from the ‘spirit

⁹⁹ *GM*: III, 17.

¹⁰⁰ Milkowski (1998), p. 77.

¹⁰¹ *A*: 58.

¹⁰² *KSA*: 13:16[15] = *WP*: 438.

¹⁰³ Vincenzo (1994), pp. 391-392.

of revenge'. Despite Nietzsche's assertion that Epicurean delight "is out of the question" due to the tragic and absurd nature of the world, it may be comparable to the "Dionysian joy" that acknowledges and rejoices over this fact, since it entails a form of the will to power that has mastered reactivity.¹⁰⁴

I find a third problem in charging Epicurus with any form of scepticism. This rather flies in the face of the established scholarly understanding of Epicurean epistemology.¹⁰⁵ The latter is normally interpreted as supporting the truth of all sense impressions and displaying a concern and ultimately a dismissal of sceptical claims about knowledge. Unfortunately, I must pass over this contentious issue here. However, at least one recent commentator gives Nietzsche's view some credence. Wilson H. Shearin suggests that underlying moral concerns are associated with the Epicurean goal of freedom from disturbance linked to concerns over the potential actions of enraged Greek divinities, which would affect any search for truth and knowledge.¹⁰⁶ However, even if we grant that Epicurus displays 'weak' sceptical tendencies, a passage from book five of *The Gay Science* – written around the time his explicit interest in decadence begins – Nietzsche also seems to associate Epicurus with his preferred strong version:

Why we seem to be Epicureans . . . an almost Epicurean bent of knowledge develops that will not easily let go of the questionable character of things; also an aversion to big moral words and gestures; a taste that rejects all crude, four-square oppositions and is proudly aware of its practice in entertaining doubts.¹⁰⁷

Therefore, although we note that Nietzsche has indeed cast the aspersions of 'moralistic' scepticism upon Epicurus, one may worry that he attempts to confirm (rather than disconfirm) his hypothesis of decadence, and does so by making Epicurus fit his decadent paradigm. As I have tried to show –

¹⁰⁴ KSA: 11:25[95] = WP: 1029.

¹⁰⁵ See Bett (2005), p. 61, Ansell-Pearson (2013), p. 98, and Shearin (2014), pp. 73-76.

¹⁰⁶ "Thus, with regard to knowledge and science in Epicureanism, Nietzsche does seem to have fastened upon something broadly correct, even if his point does not fully amount to the denial of the possibility of knowledge.", Shearin (2014), p. 74.

¹⁰⁷ GS: 375.

albeit briefly – there are some serious interpretational issues on whether his assessment really holds water.

7.4 Conclusion

In Nietzsche's evaluation, Pyrrho's epistemology and Epicurus' ethical hedonism are primarily an expression of a moral psychological need, which reflects an internal weakness. This is what is really indicative of their underlying instincts for decadence; that this world, as ordinarily experienced for them is of no value. Nietzsche associates such views with the ascetic ideal in general and Christianity in particular. Pyrrho's and Epicurus' escapist pursuit of *ataraxia* then is thus symptomatic of their underlying physiological-decadence and, he goes even further, an expression of nihilism. Furthermore, Nietzsche does not concur with the Pyrrhonian or Epicurean association of *ataraxia* with the good life, nor with the belief that it constitutes psychological health.

Regarding the ways of life advocated by Pyrrho and Epicurus, these are in fact presented as very different from Nietzsche's own views. They recommend scepticism and ethical-hedonism – whereas for Nietzsche the avoidance of trouble and strife is not only not important, but accepted as a fact of life and seen as a challenge for extraordinary self-discipline and mastery.¹⁰⁸ In particular there is a contrast to be drawn between hedonism, on the one hand, and Nietzsche's alternative to hedonism: for he privileges resistance and the experience of effectiveness or power over any simpler type of pleasure. Those who fail to seek power or dwell in an on-going scepticism will not be able to envisage a better life, and therefore will be consigned to live a worse one. Nietzsche sees the pursuit of power as a pre-requisite for the possibility of creating new forms of knowledge and values. This necessitates that each individual makes personal, contextual, and perspectival decisions in shaping his life and world, unlike Pyrrho or Epicurus and their respective followers. The undertaking of creating values warrants a psychological attitude of imposing oneself on the world that is the very opposite of suspension of beliefs, or avoidance of pain in the pursuit of tranquillity. Some

¹⁰⁸ NCW: Epilogue.

commentators argue that the aim of *ataraxia* is indeed apathy or insensibility (*apatheia*) or gentleness (*praotēs*),¹⁰⁹ which in Nietzsche's view are both detrimental qualities that he also attributes to Pyrrho.¹¹⁰ Nietzsche's concerns over *ataraxia* then are due to the fact that it is simply incompatible with his favoured conception of health and well-being that requires creative, personal growth and the experience of one's effective agency and power.

I have argued that Nietzsche's depictions of Pyrrho and Epicurus as decadents are misrepresentative in a number of ways. This, I believe this, is indicative of one of the pitfalls of his abductive method. He tacitly or explicitly – makes a hypothesis, that 'X' or 'Y' long to escape from a condition of suffering – and seek way 'Z' that is symptomatic of their dislike of, and their inability, to face the harshness of reality.¹¹¹ One such way is to pursue the ideal of *ataraxia*, an ethical principle and quasi-religious practice that for Nietzsche is sufficient to indicate the presence of decadence.¹¹² He then casts around looking for other examples conforming to this type, be it Buddhist or Christian. The problem is that one gets the impression that he is interpreting the facts to fit the theory, and bends or ignores those that are not appropriate.

¹⁰⁹ Berry (2011), p. 139 & Berry (2013), p. 102.

¹¹⁰ KSA: 13:14[99] = WP: 437.

¹¹¹ KSA: 13:17[6] = WP: 44.

¹¹² Proponents of Stoicism often made use of the term, as they too sought mental tranquillity and saw *ataraxia* as highly valuable. However, in Stoicism *ataraxia* is not an end to be pursued for its own sake, but is rather a natural consequence that occurs in a person who pursues virtue. I am not aware of any attempt by Nietzsche to portray a Stoic as a decadent because of *ataraxia*, although Seneca and Epictetus are listed in conjunction with other known decadents: *TI*: Skirmishes, 1, KSA: 12:9[11] & 12:10[120]. Yet a notebook entry portrays a stoical kind of morality as a means "with which the healthy instinct defends itself against incipient decadence", KSA: 13:15[29] = WP: 268.

Chapter 8: Spencer – The Decadent Scientist

8.1 Introduction

Nietzsche emphatically labels Herbert Spencer a decadent.¹ Out of the dozen or so individuals that earn this distinct opprobrium, he is the only one who could be remotely construed as a scientist.² Spencer is now best known as the coiner of the phrase ‘survival of the fittest’,³ and perhaps mistakenly so, as the father of Social Darwinism.⁴ He developed an influential system of evolutionary ethics with the intent of discovering and elaborating the principle of right and wrong conduct on a scientific basis, which was premised on the idea that nature is inherently moral.⁵ Spencer’s exposition is perhaps best described as a kind of physiological utilitarianism, claiming that evolution leans towards the refinement of altruistic principles which culminates in the reconciliation of egoism with altruism.⁶ This ‘Synthetic Philosophy’ as Spencer called it, was then an ambitious endeavour to unify elements of metaphysics, the sciences of biology, sociology, psychology, and morality through the theory of evolution.⁷

Although Nietzsche’s published works contain only six direct references to Spencer⁸ – all from his later works that express his interest in decadence – his notebooks contain more than thirty, reflecting an engagement with his thought from around 1875 onwards. He appears to have acquired a translated special edition of Spencer’s *The Study of Sociology* in 1875,⁹ and then a translated copy of his *The Data of Ethics* in circa 1880,¹⁰ but some initial enthusiasm of the latter¹¹ seems to have

¹ *TI*: Skirmishes, 37 & *KSA*: 13:14[40] = *WP*: 53.

² The German term ‘*Wissenschaft*’ has a broader meaning than the English ‘science’, and encompasses both the hard natural sciences such as physics, chemistry, biology and physiology, and the human sciences like psychology, sociology, history, and philology. When Nietzsche speaks of ‘science’ he is potentially referring to both, but normally has the latter in mind.

³ Spencer (1864): §164 & §165.

⁴ Francis (2011), p. 168.

⁵ Spencer (1879): §21.

⁶ Spencer (1879): §91.

⁷ Spencer (1879): Preface.

⁸ *GS*: 373, *BGE*: 253, *GM*: I, 3 & II, 12, *TI*: Skirmishes, 37, & *EH*: Destiny, 4.

⁹ Brobjer (2008), p. 64 & p. 255.

¹⁰ Moore (2002a), p. 62 & Brobjer (2008), p. 219 & p. 255.

¹¹ At one point he was so enamoured as to urge his publisher to obtain the German translation rights. Moore (2002a), p. 61.

quickly cooled.¹² Thereafter, his acquaintance with Spencer's thought was to remain second-hand through acquiring the Anglo-German zoologist William Rolph's *Biologische Probleme (Biological Problems)* in 1884,¹³ which include a popular response to Spencer's views that Nietzsche had mixed feelings about.¹⁴ Spencer was the catalyst for Nietzsche's own project of 'physiological ethics' from 1880-1883,¹⁵ and also had a major impact on his use of moral vocabulary, for Nietzsche started using the term 'altruism' (*Altruismus*) in place of 'unegoistic' (*Unegoistische*) after reading Spencer's *The Data of Ethics*.¹⁶ Despite these influences, Nietzsche came to perceive Spencer and his philosophy very negatively,¹⁷ as a brand of the Darwinism that he fundamentally disagreed with,¹⁸ even though Spencer's conception of evolution perhaps has more in common with Lamarck's model¹⁹ than Darwin's.²⁰

In this last chapter dedicated to an exemplar decadent, I will proceed as before, and examine Nietzsche's scattered comments on Spencer using the decadent's four attributes of weakness that I have previously identified – the psychological, the epistemological, the metaphysical and that of agency. I will argue that what invites Nietzsche's disapproval of Spencer's thought, such that he considers him a decadent, is not just Spencer's advocating of a morality based on altruism. Rather, what is of greater concern to Nietzsche, is Spencer's projection of the decadent values of this morality as inevitable, as part of his belief in objective, scientific and sociological truths. I will begin with Spencer's psychological weakness.

8.2 The Psychological: Spencer's Need of Moral Certitude

Nietzsche regards Spencer as decadent because the drives that constitute him are subjugated by one predominant drive, in this case, an altruistic disposition and attitude that tyrannizes all other drives.

¹² Emden (2014), p. 37.

¹³ Moore (2002a), p. 47 and Brobjer (2008), p. 91 & p. 254.

¹⁴ KSA: 11:35[34].

¹⁵ Moore (2002a), p. 62.

¹⁶ Small (2005), pp. 169-171.

¹⁷ Two quotes from Spencer are entitled: 'Inscriptions for the Door of a Modern Madhouse', KSA: 13:14[48] = WP: 541.

¹⁸ KSA: 11:35[34].

¹⁹ Call (1998), p. 4, but Francis (2011), p. 170, demurs.

²⁰ Small (2005), p. 165, Johnson (2010), pp. 4-5, and Emden (2014), p. 165.

As such, Spencer is an exemplar of decadence not unlike Socrates and Wagner, who were controlled by rationality²¹ and acting²² respectively. As I outlined in Chapter 1.2, according to Nietzsche, drives are desires that dominate and orientate a person. So for Nietzsche, a contemporary scientist like Spencer is following his instinctual drives that include the basic human drive for knowledge, as he progresses his allegedly objective scientific endeavours. However, if any drive aims to achieve mastery over other drives, the resulting science in Spencer's case is actually symptomatic of one particular underlying but dominant drive. This drive and its normative goal guide the construction of the scientist's resultant explanation, seeking to merely validate the world in accordance with an unknown, pre-existing moral bias, rather than in an affective and reflective equilibrium that Nietzsche favours.²³ Therefore for Nietzsche, Spencer is in the grip of a value and searching for justifications for it, such that any alleged value that altruism has is merely couched in the language but not the substance of scientific explanation.

Nietzsche's claim concerning Spencer's biased orientation is clearly made in a passage from the fifth book of *The Gay Science* entitled "'Science' as prejudice". Nietzsche's interest – as illustrated by the scare quotes – is not science as such, but rather a certain problematic practice of science. This practice is one that is already guided by moral prejudgements, a thinking that to him is indicative of mediocrity, where the drive or will for 'objective' knowledge or truth²⁴ loses to the drive or will for value, such that the world becomes represented in the scientist's values.²⁵

It follows from the laws that govern rank ordering (*Rangordnung*) that scholars, insofar as they belong to the intellectual middle class, are not even allowed to catch sight of the truly *great* problems and question marks; moreover, their courage and eyes simply don't reach that far –

²¹ *TI*: Socrates, 10.

²² *CW*: 8. *Cf.*, *GS*: 368.

²³ *D*: 119. On perspectivism that aims at a more reflective drive-affect equilibrium, see *GM*: III, 12.

²⁴ *BGE*: 6.

²⁵ *BGE*: 9.

and above all, the need that makes them scholars, their inner expectations and wish that things might be *such and such*, their fear and hope, too soon find rest and satisfaction.²⁶

As we have seen in Chapter 4.3.5, Nietzsche construes anyone seeking mere reassurance in scientific objectivity and certitude as psychologically weak. In order to supplant any anxiety arising from the internal turmoil between the drives striving and competing for orientation in an uncertain world, one tyrannical drive is involuntarily allowed to dominate, which for Spencer is that of altruism. Hence, the phrase 'rest and satisfaction' is almost certainly an allusion to the ancient Greek ethical doctrine of *ataraxia* – the striving for tranquillity and equanimity – which as we saw in Chapter 7.1 Nietzsche considers to be a decadent practice as advocated by Pyrrho and Epicurus.²⁷

Nietzsche argues that Spencer is an example of the kind of scholar who wants to find the world to be in accordance with what he wishes, that once his 'will to value' has been satisfied to represent the world in a way that conforms to what he values – he will then rest content, for the truth has been ascertained and ignorance, error and unease have swiftly been laid to rest.²⁸ Spencer is unaware that his views are partially constructed using empirical evidence gathered by viewing it through his own value-tinted glasses, and that the consequent 'fables' he generates are constituted by prevailing 'herd' values:

What makes, for instance, the pedantic Englishman Herbert Spencer rave in his own way and makes him draw a line of hope, a horizon which defines what is desirable; that definitive reconciliation of 'egoism and altruism' about which he spins fables – this almost nauseates the likes of us: a human race that adopts as its ultimate perspective such a Spencerian perspective would strike us as deserving of contempt, of annihilation! But *that* he had to view as his

²⁶ GS: 373

²⁷ KSA: 13:14[99] = WP: 437.

²⁸ KSA: 13:15[46] = WP: 452.

highest hope what to others counts and should count only as a disgusting possibility is a question mark that Spencer would have been unable to foresee.²⁹

As I shall show next, Spencer's predilection for moral certitude leads directly to the second attribute of weakness regarding his inability to correctly evaluate knowledge claims.

8.3 The Epistemological: Spencer's Claims of Objectivity

Spencer argued in his first book, *Social Statics* (1851), that the propositions of ethics have a self-evident quality akin to Euclidean geometry. He subsequently reiterated and combined this view with evolutionary theory, and proposed that morality should be treated as a science.³⁰ Nietzsche criticises Spencer's propensity of treating his conclusions regarding ethics, evolution and also social theory, as being inevitable and having an unconditional validity akin to that associated with mathematical and logical theorems. In particular, Nietzsche opposes Spencer's materialism-inspired but misguided notion of an 'ultimate perspective' – that the practical benefit of a judgement is evidence for its truth and value – where subjective cognitive constructs reflect objective structures inherent to the world since they have derived by adaptation to it.³¹

For Nietzsche, there is no access to such indubitable knowledge. Rather the comparative benefit of certain beliefs shows them to be useful for a particular form of life. In the case of geometry, this usefulness is pertinent to human experience and with no substantial correspondence to some sort of metaphysical entities.³² If one cannot step outside of one's own mind, then we have no certainty that any world interpretation produced by "four-cornered little human reason" grasps reality as it really is, let alone from this grasp what it ought to be.³³ Nor should one be dismissive of other interpretations, as the truly scientific person is one who is modest about his interpretations of the world, or 'of reality'. As there are many different perspectives on the world and each one is

²⁹ GS: 373.

³⁰ Spencer (1879): §45.

³¹ GS: 373.

³² KSA: 13:14[152] = WP: 515.

³³ GS: 373.

indicative of some set of needs, emotion or interest,³⁴ attempts to go beyond these perspectival valuations are bids for ‘wisdom’, which Nietzsche regards as indicative of the weakening of the scientist’s interpretive power.³⁵ For Nietzsche, claims of objectivity are symptomatic of decadence as they are due to a disgregation of the will. The scientific perspective aiming at objectivity, presupposes a high degree of indifference (*Adiaphorie*) towards other “normal drives” that commonly shape one’s perspectives and orientate one’s life, resulting in their isolation and a resistance to them (*Widerstand gegen die Normal-Triebe*).³⁶

Spencer’s evolutionary ethics – like the morality of Kant – are an example of an unwitting “inner psychological tendency”. Such surreptitious tendencies “conceal and corrupt the facts of how our thoughts have come to us . . . The driving forces and evaluations have long lain below the surface; what comes out is effect.”³⁷ As indeed is any quest for an objective science-effect:

I fight against all the hypocrisy of scientific attitude . . . in the claims to *objectivity*, to cold impersonality, where, as in all valuations, we tell something about ourselves and our inner experiences in a few words.³⁸

For Nietzsche, then, Spencer’s marriage of ethics to an objective science is an example of scepticism that has changed its appearance, and reflects the inherent weakness of someone who cannot fully realise and accept that there is no *absolute* truth. Spencer is an exemplar of someone who avoids seeking the truth of reality because of a tacit and fearful acknowledgement that it cannot really be known. Yet he still aspires to a scientific kind of objective certitude founded upon moral principles. Nietzsche interprets Spencer’s quest for objectivity as betraying another, a third attribute of weakness that I will turn to next: illusory metaphysical ideals that reject reality.

³⁴ GS: 344.

³⁵ KSA: 12:5[14] = WLN, p. 108/WP: 608.

³⁶ KSA: 13:14[83] = WP: 444.

³⁷ KSA: 11:35[31] = WP: 424.

³⁸ KSA: 11:35[32] = WLN, p. 20/WP: 424.

8.4 The Metaphysical: Spencer's Rejection of Reality and the Embracing of Ideals

Nietzsche's interest in decadence in his later works introduces a propensity to look at science as a problem that must be looked at in a new way. As a result he develops a critique of its allegedly metaphysical foundations.³⁹ As I have shown, he now comes to see science as erected on moral grounds, and its belief in truth belies its inheritance of the ascetic ideal.⁴⁰ The scientist operates like an ascetic priest, furthering the principles of the ascetic form cloaked in the garb of scientific objectivity, and requires the ascetic ideal for science's continuation. Neither the formal methods, nor the resultant conclusions of scientific practice, can be perceived as the origin of the sciences' value creating power. Nietzsche argues, in a famous passage, that the origin of any normative force of scientific accounts of the world must lie elsewhere:

No doubt, those who are truthful in that audacious and ultimate sense which faith in science presupposes *thereby affirm another world* than that of life, nature, and history; and insofar as they affirm this 'other world', must they not by the same token deny its counterpart, this world, *our world*? . . . it is still a *metaphysical faith* upon which our faith in science rests – that even we knowers of today, we godless anti-metaphysicians, still take *our* fire, too, from the flame lit by the thousand-year old faith, the Christian faith which was also Plato's faith, that God is truth; that truth is divine . . .⁴¹

The way in which we frame scientific accounts itself needs to be naturalized in order to get a clearer understanding of the sciences' alleged normative force.

In Nietzsche's view, Spencer's notion of truth is tainted by implausible claims to objectivity, and echoes the traits of metaphysical and dogmatic philosophy. Spencer is unable to see that what

³⁹ *BT*: Self-Criticism, 2, *GS*: 344 & *GM*: III, 24.

⁴⁰ *BT*: Self-Criticism, 1.

⁴¹ *GS*: 344. *Cf.*, *GM*: III, 24.

guides his scientific practice is piety.⁴² His dogmatic insistence on the value of objectivity for Nietzsche amounts to a denial of the particularity of our perspectives. Spencer is following the ascetic principle of abstinence when he orients himself beyond the needs and knowledge of this world.

Spencer's synthesis of biology and morality is an attempt to rise to the challenge of a naturalised understanding of values. Yet it also reflects his perception of a wider need in society to find a new justification for the prevailing Judeo-Christian moral values.⁴³ This arises because the traditional values are in the process of becoming disconnected from any metaphysical foundation.⁴⁴ These and other concerns are implicit in the passage from *The Gay Science* examined above where Nietzsche claims that science is prejudiced by moral values. They are more clearly reiterated in a notebook entry intended as a retrospective preface for the 1887 edition of *Daybreak*:

*Fundamental problem: where does this unlimited power of belief come from? Of belief in morality? (– which also betrays itself in the way even the fundamental conditions of life are misinterpreted in favour of morality, despite knowledge of the animal and plant worlds.) 'self-preservation': Darwinian perspective on the reconciliation of altruistic and egoistic principles.*⁴⁵

The reference to the reconciliation of altruism and egoism is an allusion to Spencer, and Nietzsche clearly thinks Spencer is wrongly interpreting the basic conditions of life. Rather than working in a scientifically rigorous manner, Spencer offers erroneous hypotheses that are in direct conflict with the contemporary scientific knowledge for the sole purpose of accommodating his moral concerns. Hence, it is ironic that Spencer – the agnostic – is unaware that his science is based on Christian ideals.

⁴² KSA: 11:35[31] = WP: 424 & 11:35[32] = WLN, p. 20/WP: 424.

⁴³ See Fitzgerald (1987).

⁴⁴ GM: III, 24.

⁴⁵ KSA: 12:2[165] = WLN, pp. 92-94/WP: 253.

Since these ideals are at the heart of Nietzsche's portrayal of Spencer as a decadent, I will examine them in some detail. I will start with the ideals pertaining to morality and altruism, before moving on to discuss how these ideals have become implicit to the functioning of society, and hence the then emerging discipline of sociology.

8.4.1 The Decadent Ideals of Morality and Altruism

The general thrust of Nietzsche's attack on Spencer is captured in a notebook entry:⁴⁶ "As a biologist, Mr. Herbert Spencer is a decadent; as a moralist, too (he considers the triumph of altruism a desideratum! ! !)." ⁴⁷ Nietzsche accepts that most moralities make a fundamental distinction between egoistic and altruistic motives or actions. Altruism, based wholly on concern for the welfare or benefit of others, involves an intended sacrifice of one's interests in order to advance another's. Nietzsche's aversion to altruism is captured by his curt exclamation "*No altruism!*",⁴⁸ and stems from his belief that the general view that altruism is essential to moralities is a mistaken superstition that dubious "historians of morality" – particularly English ones, such as Spencer – are all too willing to blindly repeat and "serve as its shield-bearers and followers".⁴⁹ Nietzsche embarks on a critique of altruism based on three elements. First, he rejects the view that the motivation of altruism is selfless. Secondly, he disputes that altruistic acts have greater value than self-interested acts. Thirdly, he claims that altruism has other natural foundation than the physiology of the decadent, ill-constituted person, and that its value is purely based on social custom. I will examine and evaluate these three criticisms in turn.

Nietzsche is inherently suspicious of the impetus and attitude of self-sacrifice of one's interests to advance those of another that is considered fundamental to altruism. The first element of his critique involves a questioning of the coherence of many of the examples of supposedly selfless actions. In particular, Nietzsche fundamentally disagrees with Spencer's attempt to establish the presence of altruism in all organisms. He mocks Spencer's interpretation of propagation as

⁴⁶ See Moore (2002b) and Richardson (2004), pp, 139-177.

⁴⁷ KSA: 13:14[40] = WP: 53. Cf., TI: Skirmishes, 37.

⁴⁸ GS: 119.

⁴⁹ GS: 345.

altruism, especially when it is extended to the lowest forms of life like amoebas.⁵⁰ Nietzsche further ridicules Spencer's efforts to demonstrate the ubiquitous nature of altruism by claiming the term can be applied to any basic physiological activity that involved a loss of substance – so called “automatic altruism”⁵¹ – particularly when trying to explain reproduction⁵² as a non-conscious form of self-sacrifice.⁵³ Nietzsche therefore aims to reduce the prevalence and legitimacy of altruism:

Recently Comte's superficial comparison of altruism and egoism – but there is no altruism at all! – Exported from France to England; and now we see, for example, in Herbert Spencer, the attempt to reconcile himself, with such a refusal to take any concept in a strict sense, that in England now even **urination** (*Urin-lassen*)⁵⁴ is supposed to belong among the altruistic activities.⁵⁵

Whereas Spencer postulates a refinement of primitive altruistic principles, Nietzsche argues the opposite. He claims that organic change is a process of progressive individuation, and there is an evolution towards the individual, a refinement of egoism that is inhibited by altruism:

[T]he altruistic drive is an *obstacle* to the recognition of the individual . . . because the weak people fear the strong individual and prefer the *general weakening*, rather than the development to what is the individual.⁵⁶

Indeed, Nietzsche offers an argument that attempts to abolish altruism altogether, along with egoism. It can be found in a long notebook entry from autumn 1887, entitled ‘The History of

⁵⁰ KSA: 12:10[13] = WP: 653.

⁵¹ Spencer (1879): §75.

⁵² KSA: 9:6[137].

⁵³ KSA: 11:26[303].

⁵⁴ Literally: ‘urine-letting’.

⁵⁵ Von Frankreich her ist neuerdings noch die oberflächliche Gegenüberstellung Comte's vom Altruismus und Egoismus — aber es giebt gar keinen Altruismus! — nach England gedrungen; und nun sehen wir z.B. bei Herbert Spencer den Versuch, auch damit wieder sich zu vertragen, mit einem solchen schlechten Willen, irgend einen Begriff noch streng zu nehmen, daß nunmehr **Urin-lassen** in England bereits schon unter die altruistischen Thätigkeiten gehören dürfte. KSA: 11:35[34] = MT.

⁵⁶ [D]er altruistische Trieb ist ein *Hinderniß* für die Anerkennung des Individuums . . . weil die schwachen Menschen das starke Individuum fürchten und lieber die *allgemeine Schwächung* wollen, statt der Entwicklung zum Individuellen. KSA: 9:6[163] = MT.

Moralization and Demoralization’,⁵⁷ and is a prototype that parallels the structure of the famous passage ‘How the ‘True World’ Finally Became a Fable’, with one striking difference.⁵⁸ Whereas the published six-point polemic is, despite its departure from normal modes of philosophical inquiry, a masterpiece of brevity, clarity and also wit, the notebook version – which also has at its core six stages – is a rather convoluted exposition by comparison, that would require significant analysis to elucidate properly.⁵⁹ In order to highlight its significance, I will simply map the logical structure of the clearer and better known published argument onto the notebook version.

The published version describes the descent from ‘truth’ to ‘fable’ of the supposed ‘real’ world of the idealism of Platonic forms whose abolition also does away with the ‘apparent’ world as one of *mere* appearance. This generates a new appreciation of the world of appearance as the only reality, the abolition of any distinction between truth and appearance, and with it the opportunity for new ways of thinking about reality. In a similar fashion, the notebook version references the conflict of altruism and egoism as portrayed in Spencer’s *Data of Ethics*. The notebook entry traces the path of altruism from its usurpation of moral value, through the progressive decline of its authority to the point that it becomes superfluous, and contrasts this with a rehabilitation of egoism from the status of suppression and slander. The intention is to eliminate the distinction between altruism and egoism, to the point that altruism, just like the ‘true world’ becomes a fable. This exposes the egoism disguised as altruism, which in reality is a drive to express one’s own power and strength, for example, by ‘giving alms’ to those who are lower in the order of rank of humanity:

[F]inally, one grasps that altruistic actions are only a species of egoistic actions – and that the degree to which one loves, spends oneself, proves the degree of individual power and personality.⁶⁰

⁵⁷ KSA: 12:10[57] = WP: 786.

⁵⁸ *TJ*: Fable.

⁵⁹ See Small (2005), pp. 172-177.

⁶⁰ KSA: 12:10[57] = WP: 786.

The parallel with the ‘fable’ of the true world breaks down in the end. Just as is the case that the demise of the real world abolishes the apparent one,⁶¹ so too it could be construed that with altruism he aims to abolish egoism also. If this is so, then this goes beyond Spencer’s position, who clearly upholds the distinction between altruism and egoism even when expounding their interdependence in everyday life and their reconciliation in an impending utopian society.

This is not the only instance where Nietzsche presents a potentially misleading picture of Spencer’s position. It is however, perhaps not as striking as Nietzsche’s misleading statements that Spencer sees something desirable in the “victory” (*Sieg*) of altruism⁶² – rather than a more accurate “reconciliation” (*Versöhnung*) of it with egoism that he sometimes states⁶³ – for Spencer clearly writes of a “compromise”⁶⁴ and “conciliation” of altruism and egoism.⁶⁵ Moreover, Spencer’s endorsement of altruism is overall actually rather limited. To give one example, he remarks in his work *Social Statics* that someone who shares in the happiness of others will gain more sources of satisfaction from that fact, which may be a plausible observation, but appeals to self-interest in making the case for altruism.⁶⁶

Nietzsche’s second strand of criticism is the general belief that acts of altruism are considered to be of greater value and benefit to humanity than those that are motivated by self-interest. For Spencer, the alleged value of altruism extends beyond being a personal and social virtue to include socio-political practices, whereas Nietzsche argues that altruistic acts contribute to human weakness and degeneration. By denying that altruistic actions are of the greatest value Nietzsche is not only denying the value of what is normally regarded as the mark of moral behaviour, he is building a case for egoism. Since “morality never has an inherent value”, he is intentionally avoiding the challenge

⁶¹ *TI*: Fable.

⁶² *TI*: Skirmishes, 37. *Cf.*, *KSA*: 13:14[40] = *WP*: 53.

⁶³ *GS*: 373 & *KSA*: 12:2[165] = *WLN*, pp. 92-94/*WP*: 253. *Cf.*, *KSA*: 11:35[34].

⁶⁴ Spencer (1879): §91.

⁶⁵ Spencer (1879): §95.

⁶⁶ Spencer (1851): I, III, §2.

to replace the conception of 'moral behaviour' with a superior one.⁶⁷ Instead Nietzsche is in favour of replacing the notion of moral value with another kind of value standard for evaluating actions – that they must enhance and empower a person's life.⁶⁸

In *The Genealogy*, Nietzsche contrasts Spencer's explanation of morality with that of Paul Rée's genealogical account, describing the former as more sensible and psychologically tenable, though no closer to the truth:

How much more sensible is the opposite theory (that doesn't make it any more true –), which is held, for example, by Herbert Spencer: he judges the concept 'good' as essentially the same as 'useful', 'practical', so that in their judgments 'good' and 'bad', people sum up and sanction their *unforgotten, unforgettable* experiences of what is useful-practical, harmful-impractical. According to this theory, good is what has always shown itself to be useful: so it can claim validity as 'valuable in the highest degree', as 'valuable as such'. This route towards an explanation is wrong, as I said, but at least the explanation in itself is rational and psychologically tenable.⁶⁹

Nietzsche's rejects this crucial assumption of Spencer's evolutionary ethics, which has taken the value-neutral conception of benefit and distorted it into a distinct sort of morality with substantive claims. He argues that it is founded on a profoundly erroneous conception of morality's origins.⁷⁰ Nietzsche's well-known hypothesis in *The Genealogy* is that the labelling of altruistic actions as 'good' began as part of a slave revolt in morality, and was instigated by the socially inferior classes of individuals out of feelings of resentment against their aristocratic masters, that motivated them, with the help of the priests, to create new value distinctions.⁷¹

⁶⁷ *TI*: Skirmishes, 37.

⁶⁸ *KSA*: 12:2[190] = *WLN*, pp. 95-96/*WP*: 254.

⁶⁹ *GM*: I, 3.

⁷⁰ *KSA*: 9:1[106].

⁷¹ *GM*: I, 2.

In one passage, Nietzsche argues against Spencer's position without actually identifying him. He claims that actions that are substantially or wholly motivated by selfish concerns and so according to common use of the term are considered 'morally evil', are in fact as a beneficial to humanity as those actions that are usually taken to be selfless and other-regarding and commonly regarded as 'morally good':

Nowadays there is a thoroughly erroneous moral theory which is celebrated especially in England: it claims that judgements of 'good' and 'evil' sum up experiences of what is 'expedient' and 'inexpedient'; that what is called good preserves the species while what is called evil harms it. In truth, however, the evil drives are just as expedient, species-preserving, and indispensable as the good ones – they just have a different function.⁷²

He elsewhere argues that actions motivated by selfish considerations are as beneficial to humanity as ones that that are taken to be selfless,⁷³ or possibly even more so and will actually enhance mankind,⁷⁴ including ones that are considered 'evil'.⁷⁵

More central to Nietzsche's disdain is this mistaken valuing of selflessness or self-denial at the expense of prizing natural self-interest, an example of a 'morality of selflessness' as discussed in Chapters 1.3.4 and 4.5.4.⁷⁶ Recall that the latter is a form of self-denial that is the clearest articulation of a life-negating ethic that involves a battle against one's very own instincts, will and vitality.⁷⁷ Indeed, he is extremely critical of all forms of benevolence,⁷⁸ based on sympathy,⁷⁹ compassion or pity.⁸⁰ As stated in a notebook entry, "[t]he altruistic one [who] talks much of pity—and is distinguished by the weakness of the personality", which is indicative of a disgregation of the will, and so a common form of decadence that is essentially inimical to life.⁸¹ Moreover, these forms

⁷² GS: 4.

⁷³ BGE: 44.

⁷⁴ BGE: 2.

⁷⁵ GS: 4.

⁷⁶ KSA: 12:10[153] = WP: 297.

⁷⁷ EH: Destiny, 7.

⁷⁸ EH: Destiny, 4.

⁷⁹ TI: Skirmishes, 37.

⁸⁰ A: 7.

⁸¹ KSA: 13:17[6] = WP: 44. Cf., TI: Skirmishes, 35.

of benevolence are ultimately incompatible with the selfish urges that are Nietzsche claims, the source of all individual achievement.⁸² Instead the proper priority is concern for oneself, the freedom associated with self-selection of one's own personal virtues and values,⁸³ to achieve self-creation through having one's own laws.⁸⁴

Nietzsche's third strand of criticism applies a physiological approach to valuation, and he concludes that there is no physiological basis to attribute a 'law' for the supposed merits of altruism.⁸⁵ A valuation based on altruism is caused by corrupted instincts that were originally egoistical in nature, and convey a disparaging judgement of one's self-worth that is a symptom of a declining life:

The ascendancy of an altruistic way of valuating is the consequence of an instinct of being ill-constituted. The value judgement on the most basic level says: 'I am not worth much' – a purely physiological value judgement, or more clearly still: the feeling of powerlessness, the absence of the great affirming feelings of power (in the muscles, nerves, centres of motion). Depending on the culture of these classes, the value judgement translates itself into a moral or religious judgement (– the predominance of religious and moral judgements is always a sign of lower culture –) . . .⁸⁶

Altruism runs counter to his idea of rank ordering of people and their intellects,⁸⁷ and it contributes to human weakness or degeneration and damages self-interests.⁸⁸ The removal of the distinction leads Nietzsche to a 'revaluation' of egoism,⁸⁹ where altruism is replaced by self-regard, the value of which depends upon whether individuals represent "either the ascending or the descending line of

⁸² GS: 13.

⁸³ Z: I, Creator.

⁸⁴ GS: 335.

⁸⁵ KSA: 13:15[41] = WP: 52.

⁸⁶ KSA: 13:14[29] = WLN, pp. 242-244/WP: 373.

⁸⁷ KSA: 12:7[9] = WLN, p. 133/WP: 681.

⁸⁸ KSA: 12:9[30] = WP: 785.

⁸⁹ D: 148 & GS: 328.

life”.⁹⁰ A notebook entry goes as far as to make the sweeping claim that “[i]n fact, everything ‘unegoistic’ is a phenomenon of decadence.”⁹¹

For Nietzsche, life should not be merely a struggle for existence as presented by Spencer but also an on-going striving toward ever-greater diversity, complexity, creativity and power that increases the quality of life forms. However, the very practice of altruism actually supports the natural tendency for the human animal to evolve toward common mediocrity, by artificially aiding the weak and sick and thereby prevents them from being ‘deselected’.⁹² A less controversial and more palatable interpretation is that in Nietzsche’s view we need to guard against merely reacting to stimuli, for losing the power of self-control to defend oneself against the weak and sick is indicative of a weakness of personality due to decadence.⁹³ In the place of altruism he proposes a healthy dose of selfishness.⁹⁴ Selfishness is linked to the superior unconscious organization of one’s own diverse nature, over any conscious self-knowledge and the employment of any imperatives,⁹⁵ especially those of an altruistic nature.⁹⁶ Altruism risks wasting or further corrupting the little selfishness that survives:

An ‘altruistic’ morality, a morality in which selfishness *fades away* –, is always a bad sign. This is true for the individual, it is even more true for peoples. You are missing the best part when selfishness begins to fail. To choose instinctively what is harmful to *yourself*, to be *tempted* by ‘disinterested’ motives, this is practically the formula for decadence . . . People are done for when they become altruistic.⁹⁷

Altruism, then, is a decadent value because it is detrimental to the evolution of ever more capable forms of human beings. A world free of decadent values would, Nietzsche claims, make room for life

⁹⁰ *TI*: Skirmishes, 33.

⁹¹ Tatsächlich ist alles „Unegoistische“ *décadence*-Phänomen. *KSA*: 13:22[22] = *MT*.

⁹² *EH*: Destiny, 8.

⁹³ *KSA*: 13:17[6] = *WP*: 44.

⁹⁴ *TI*: Skirmishes, 35.

⁹⁵ *EH*: Clever, 9.

⁹⁶ *KSA*: 12:7[6] = *WLN*, pp. 131-132/*WP*: 286.

⁹⁷ *TI*: Skirmishes, 35.

with a self-regarding instinct for growth. It is to the manner in which these values are the foundation for Spencer's view of an ideal society that I will now turn to.

8.4.2 The Decadent Ideals of Society

As I have shown, Nietzsche's individualist stance can be seen as a response to his belief that in general Spencer's interpretation of morality is characteristic of a mediocre individual seeking happiness.⁹⁸ In particular, Nietzsche construes Spencer's defence of altruism as hazardous to humanity due to its emasculating capacity of protection within the collective 'herd':⁹⁹

[T]o demand that everyone should become 'good', herd animals, blue-eyed (*blauäugig*),¹⁰⁰ benevolent 'beautiful souls' – or altruistic, as Mr Herbert Spencer would have it, – would mean robbing existence of its *great* character, would mean castrating humanity . . .¹⁰¹

For Spencer, social altruism arose at a time when competing groups or societies were at war with one another, and could only survive and prosper by subordinating the individual's welfare to that of the group's. So long as societies fight one another, they must constrain their members to sacrifice their interests to the group. In a future world that is at peace, the need for these constraints on individual self-interest will cease.¹⁰²

In Nietzsche's view, the group selection of interests contains two features that contradict Spencer's optimistic prediction about society. First, Nietzsche has a very different theory about what traits enable a group to survive and expand. By far the most important virtue is unity and cohesion, which is achieved by uniformity in its membership through an instinct for sharing of practices and customs. Secondly, these customs aren't selected to just serve society, but are also devised to mould society into a more favourable medium for their own proliferation. The most successful customs are those that function to bond and unite, forming a 'herd' to ease their propagation. These new selective processes instil into societies a drive to imitate and copy others – a "herd-instinct"

⁹⁸ *EH*: Destiny, 4.

⁹⁹ *KSA*: 12:7[6] = *WP*: 286 & 13:14[5] = *WLN*, pp. 240-241.

¹⁰⁰ Figuratively: 'naïve' or 'gullible'.

¹⁰¹ *EH*: Destiny, 4.

¹⁰² Spencer (1879): §76.

(*Heerden-Instinct*) – to want and do the same as they do, a nature that is in the interest not of the individual, but of society that functions as a herd.¹⁰³

The values that are propagated via this selective mechanism have become the prevailing virtues of society.¹⁰⁴ The most fundamental is equality which induces uniformity via the guided and coerced sharing of resources, practices and customs. Altruism and pity are the principal virtues produced by the values of equality and civilization that subordinate one's own interest to those of the social whole. The misguided effort to overpower humanity's natural drives through a civilizing social selection of practices has turned it into a herd of sick animals.¹⁰⁵ Society then is effectively tamed into a pro-group and anti-individualist habit of altruism. As we have seen above, Nietzsche associates decadence with all these values.¹⁰⁶ In their place, Nietzsche encourages the adoption of changed social practices that encapsulate new virtues and a suggestion of biological regulation.¹⁰⁷ He advocates the manipulation of reproduction in such a way as to train, but also to reinforce, those drives themselves, such that people will stand in an order of rank that replaces the prevailing equality of mediocrity.¹⁰⁸ The healthy individual would be one that seeks out what is best for him, utilising the values embedded in his natural constitution, which may contribute to, or be enhanced by, immersion in a life-prompting culture. This in turn depends on the individual's drives being directed towards goals that serve growth and will for that which is in its interests.

For Nietzsche then, Spencer's conception of what is required for a healthy society is based on decadent principles. Hence Nietzsche's exclamation: "Spencer always puts 'human equality' ahead."¹⁰⁹ Many of his principles have already become institutionalised in the contemporary era of egalitarian, democratic, liberal *laissez faire* capitalism. Nietzsche dismisses the resulting convention as the "Shopkeeper's philosophy of Mr. Spencer; complete absence of an ideal, except that of the

¹⁰³ GS: 50, 116, 117 & 296.

¹⁰⁴ GS: 21.

¹⁰⁵ BGE: 62.

¹⁰⁶ Equality: KSA: 13:23[1] = WP: 734. Civilization: KSA: 13:15[67] = WP: 122. Altruism: TI: Skirmishes, 35. Pity: A: 7.

¹⁰⁷ A: 3.

¹⁰⁸ BGE: 221.

¹⁰⁹ Spencer setzt immer „Gleichheit der Menschen“ voraus. KSA: 9:1[98] = MT.

mediocre man”.¹¹⁰ In another retrospective preface written in 1886, Nietzsche provides a description of the symptoms of decline of a formerly noble epoch and its modern incarnation that can be interpreted as a summary of a number of the key features of Spencer’s philosophy:

[I]t was precisely during their period of dissolution and weakness that the Greeks became ever more optimistic, more superficial, more actorly, but also filled with a greater lust for logic and for making the world logical, which is to say both more 'cheerful' and more 'scientific' – could it then perhaps be the case, despite all 'modern ideas' and the prejudices of democratic taste, that the victory of *optimism*, the predominance of *reasonableness*, practical and theoretical *utilitarianism*, like its contemporary, democracy, that all this is symptomatic of a decline in strength, of approaching old age, of physiological exhaustion?¹¹¹

Nietzsche traces the degeneration of cultures to the inexorable waning of the practices, customs, and institutions that jointly mould the dominant character of a society and people.¹¹² For him, ascending ages are inexorably followed by decline just as strong peoples eventually deteriorate. Nietzsche was convinced that nineteenth-century European society was not a high point of cultural evolution, and did not epitomise the apogee of evolutionary human development as Spencer argued.¹¹³ Rather, Nietzsche’s perception of contemporary Europe was a society of social and cultural decline – particularly in comparison with the Renaissance era – one that was fundamentally a faltering expression of exhausted, nihilistic moral and social values that are tottering on the point of implosion and are now hostile to future life.¹¹⁴

Spencer’s vision of a future humanity in a perfect state of physical and moral adaptation to their environment – his so-called “ideally moral man”¹¹⁵ – is for Nietzsche an embodiment of herd

¹¹⁰ KSA: 12:10[118] = WP: 382. Cf., KSA: 12:9[44] = WLN, pp. 149-150/WP: 901.

¹¹¹ BT: Self-Criticism, 4.

¹¹² TI: Skirmishes, 39.

¹¹³ KSA: 13:14[123] = WLN, pp. 258-260/WP: 685.

¹¹⁴ TI: Skirmishes, 37.

¹¹⁵ Spencer (1879): §30.

consciousness and an example of stagnation and degeneration.¹¹⁶ He snidely refers to Spencer's conception as the "the stable human" or "permanence human" (*der Dauermensch*)¹¹⁷ in an 1881 notebook entry.¹¹⁸ Spencer's evolved "ideal moral man" later re-emerges as Zarathustra's contemptuous "*the last human being*" (*der letzte Mensch*). The last human is 'the last', the culmination of evolutionary and cultural development and he is also 'last' in that he is devoid of sufficient energy to produce another generation. It is an object of contempt for Nietzsche, for as it shirks danger and pain, seeks comfort, base personal gratification, individual survival, and the hope for a long and uneventful life in the pursuit of happiness. Thereby the last human is ascribed very similar properties to Nietzsche's later portrayal of decadents – such as Epicurus – for whom the goal of life is happiness with the most pleasure and least pain, and attaining *ataraxia* as discussed in Chapter 7.3.¹¹⁹ Nietzsche also sees the last human as all too close to the typical contemporary European. The latter's tendencies for self-indulgence, mass culture and a dominant desire to ease the toil of existence, is merely to pursue a lifestyle that is so stable that it no longer develops.

Nietzsche parodies the view that currently humanity is the apex of creation with the idea of the Overhuman, which suggests that humanity is no such thing.¹²⁰ A stage of humanity that he hopes will be surpassed.¹²¹ The Overhuman is the culmination of Nietzsche's idea of the process of progressive individuation, a metaphor for human potential and self-overcoming and so the antithesis of both the stable human and the last human. This future human being will be able to surmount or utilise the conflicting impulses and perspectives that form his or her existence, one who has not been shackled by the disaffecting experience of serving ends that are not his own, but is instead free to postulate his own goals and values. For Nietzsche, human nature is not of itself an end or carries

¹¹⁶ Z: I, Prologue, 5. Cf., KSA: 10:4[171], 10:4[204] & 10:5[32].

¹¹⁷ Moore (2002a), p. 71, and Moore (2002b), p. 10: "'enduring man'".

¹¹⁸ KSA: 9:11[44] = MT.

¹¹⁹ A: 30.

¹²⁰ The *Übermensch* precursor is the "liberated man" (*freigewordener Mensch*), KSA: 9:11[182] = MT. Nietzsche also contrasts "*Herd people and exceptional people!*" (*Heerdenmenschen und Sondermenschen!*), KSA: 9:11[209] = MT.

¹²¹ Z: I, Prologue, 3.

within itself a determinate *telos* – it is viewed as potential for some higher, yet to be determined, and never final, end.

What is clear from this discussion of the functioning and development of society is that Nietzsche regards the emerging ‘scientific’ discipline of sociology, as practised by Spencer and Comte, as clearly embedded in a prevailing *Zeitgeist* that embodies the spirit of decadence. In his words: “Even the ideals of science can be deeply, yet completely unconsciously influenced by decadence: our entire sociology is proof of that.”¹²² Sociology is also lacking a “*pathos of distance*”, a suitable degree of detachment from the subject under investigation.¹²³ Nietzsche believes that without sufficient critical distance sociology can never provide a viable scientific account of the social processes that it is itself part of. Again, he regards sociology to be both a symptom as well as a part of modernity that utilises a decadent style of analysis:

[T]he unconscious effects of decadence have even come to dominate the ideals of some of the sciences. My objection to the whole discipline of sociology in England and France is that it has only experienced the *decaying forms* of society, and innocently uses its own instinct of decay as the norm for sociological value judgments. *Declining* life, the loss of all the forces of organization, which is to say separation, division, subordination, and domination, is formulated as an *ideal* in sociology today . . . Our socialists are decadents, but Mr Herbert Spencer is a decadent too . . .¹²⁴

According to Nietzsche then, sociology examines the constituent parts and development of decadence, of which itself is a part, and thereby operates within a flawed, decadent frame of reference.

As a consequence, sociology raises these components of decline to a normative prominence, and Nietzsche interprets them as fundamentally nihilistic: “everywhere the Christian-nihilistic value

¹²² KSA: 13:14[40] = WP: 53.

¹²³ BGE: 257.

¹²⁴ TI: Skirmishes, 37.

standard still has to be pulled up and fought under every mask; e.g., in present-day sociology".¹²⁵ Despite Nietzsche's relative ignorance of Spencer's thought, it does not stop him from conveniently – without detailed argument – integrating his critique of sociology into his more fundamental and structural evaluation of society at the end of the nineteenth century, which for him is characterised by decadence and nihilism.¹²⁶

This brings me to what is for Nietzsche perhaps the most profound attribute of weakness: a lack of agency. I will now show in this final section how he finds this attribute expressed also in Spencer.

8.5 A Restricted Agency: The 'Imposed Will' of Spencer's Science

Nietzsche would not consider Spencer as an autonomous agent, although surprisingly he does not explicitly say this in the same way he does for Wagner or Pascal for instance. Rather, all the evidence is indirectly presented as Spencer's inability to create a will of his own by self-selecting his values. As I have shown, Nietzsche interprets Spencer's thoughts on science, morality, and sociology, as the consequence of the decadent socio-political and moral values of the current age. This makes it another example of what in Chapter 4.5.2. I called 'imposed willing'. Collectively, Spencer's views culminate in an optimistic prediction concerning the future of humanity, a perspective that Nietzsche presents as the product of a severely biased, dominant altruistic drive that censors alternative possible interpretations, including different scientific hypotheses.

What is of particular interest to Nietzsche's portrayal of Spencer as exemplar decadent is that the basis for his interpretation can be traced back to a notebook entry from 1880/1881. There Nietzsche expresses this disdain for Spencer's ideal of an adaptation that abolishes the individual and clearly alludes to the decadence of humanity:

¹²⁵ KSA: 13:14[6] = WP: 51.

¹²⁶ KSA: 13:14[40] = WP: 53.

Such an adaptation as Spencer has in mind is conceivable, but so that every individual becomes a useful tool and only feels like it: thus as a *means*, as a *part* – that is, with the *abolition of individualism*, according to which [individualism] one wants to be *purpose* and wholeness, and in both a uniqueness! This transformation is possible, and yes *perhaps* history is going in this direction! But then the individuals become **weaker and weaker** – it is the story of the *downfall of humanity*, where the principle of the disinterestedness of *vivre pour autrui* [to live for others] and sociality reign!¹²⁷

A slightly earlier entry also explicitly mentions altruism in the context of science with regard to Spencer. Nietzsche accuses the moralist scientist of nothing other than being led by unconscious wishful thinking:

The value of altruism is not the result of science; instead the people of science let themselves be misled by the *now predominant drive*, to believe that science confirms the wish of their drive! cf. Spencer.¹²⁸

Nietzsche's criticism of the lack of a will of one's own – of being guided by the internalised dominant values of an ascetic, decadent culture that falsely gives scientific results the air of necessity – is corroborated by a further entry written a few months later:

At every moment of a being's present state, countless ways are open for its *development*: but the dominating drive only sanctions one as good, the one of its ideal. In this way Spencer's image of the future of humanity is not a *scientific necessity*, but a *wish* according to the ideals of the present.¹²⁹

¹²⁷ Es ist eine solche Anpassung wie sie Spencer im Auge hat denkbar, doch so daß jedes Individuum zu einem nützlichen Werkzeuge wird und sich auch nur so fühlt: also als *Mittel*, als *Theil* — also mit *Aufhebung des Individualismus*, nach dem einer *Zweck* und eine Ganzheit sein will, und zwar in beiden eine *Einzigkeit*! Diese Umbildung ist möglich, ja vielleicht läuft die Geschichte dahin! Aber dann werden die Einzelnen **immer schwächer** — es ist die Geschichte vom *Untergang der Menschheit*, wo das Princip der Uninteressirtheit des *vivre pour autrui* und die Socialität herrschen! KSA: 9:10[D60].

¹²⁸ Der Werth des Altruism ist nicht das Ergebniß der Wissenschaft; sondern die Menschen der Wissenschaft lassen sich durch den *jetzt vorherrschenden Trieb* verleiten, zu glauben, daß die Wissenschaft den Wunsch ihres Triebes bestätige. (cf. Spencer). KSA: 9:8[35] = MT.

¹²⁹ Von jedem Augenblick im Zustand eines Wesens stehen zahllose Wege seiner *Entwicklung* offen: der herrschende Trieb aber heißt nur einen einzigen gut, den nach seinem Ideale. So ist das Bild Spencer's von der Zukunft des Menschen nicht eine *naturwissenschaftliche Nothwendigkeit*, sondern ein *Wunsch* aus jetzigen Idealen heraus. KSA: 9:11[98] = MT.

So although this period significantly pre-dates Nietzsche's use of the term 'decadence', I construe these entries as already working out and describing some of the symptoms of Spencer's decadence.

What Nietzsche describes in these early examples is nothing other than part of the process of decadence: when a thinker like Spencer finds in science a justification of his instincts, he is really guided by dominant drives, that are not his own but infused with, Nietzsche might say corrupted by, the predominant values of a decadent culture. Given his decadence, a scientist like Spencer will not discover the drives and instincts need to assist an individual in affirming their own 'will' and 'freedom' in Nietzsche's sense.

8.6 Conclusion

For Nietzsche, Spencer was the epitome of the worst sort of nineteenth-century scientist. One, who was so utterly convinced of the objective truth of his theory of evolutionary ethics, that he was completely disinclined to entertain the prospect that it might be only one possible interpretation amongst many alternatives. Nietzsche speculates that such a scientist may well be devoted to knowledge, but in fact only part of him actually is due to his physiological make-up, with one or some instinctual drive(s) dominating and subjugating other drives. Spencer's tyrannical drive configuration can be construed as another example of a predominant kind of person that Nietzsche introduces in a notebook entry using the heading 'Morality as decadence':

The "good man" as tyrant . . . a certain species of man treats the conditions of its existence as conditions which ought to be imposed as a law, as "truth," "good," "perfection": it tyrannizes—
*It is a form of faith, of instinct, that a species of man fails to perceive its conditionality, its relativity to other species.*¹³⁰

Spencer's flawed constitution brings about a single, solitary perspective that is not sufficiently disengaged to appreciate other possibilities, the upshot of which is a "*bad* scholar" imbued with

¹³⁰ Moral als decadence, KSA: 13:14[158] = MT/WP: 354.

decadence.¹³¹ Moreover, Spencer is typical of the contemporary scientists' way of following his instincts as he progresses his scientific investigations, but those instincts have become corrupted, inculcated by the prevailing cultural values.¹³² While the pursuit of science itself is characteristic of the basic human will for knowledge, the resulting science as practised by people like Spencer is indicative of instincts weakened by decadence:

[O]ur desire, our will even to knowledge is a symptom of a tremendous *décadence* . . . We strive for the opposite of what is willed by *strong races, strong natures* – understanding is an ending . . . That science is possible in this sense, as it's practised today, proves that all life's elementary instincts, instincts of *self-defence* and *protection*, have ceased to function – we are no longer accumulating, we are squandering the capital of our forebears, even in our way of *knowing* –¹³³

What is perhaps surprising then is that Nietzsche fails to characterise Spencer as a 'typical' decadent as discussed in Chapters 3.3.3 and 4.5.4, and hence on par with others he identifies in this fashion, such as Wagner, Epicurus and Socrates. The discrepancy may be due in part to Spencer's agnostic stance and his 'scientific' credentials that made the ascetic, altruistic Christian ideals his thought entailed less obvious. As I have shown here, Spencer's fervent promotion of a 'scientific' certitude concerning humanity's moral progression, means he possesses the key characteristics of the 'typical' decadent,¹³⁴ which Nietzsche defines as one "who has a sense of necessity in his corrupted taste . . . who knows how to enforce his corruption as a law , as progress, as fulfilment".¹³⁵ To what extent Nietzsche is justified in subsuming Spencer under his decadence hypothesis I cannot explore here, and is perhaps less important than the substance of his critique that science may not be immune to moral corruption.

¹³¹ KSA: 13:14[83] = WP: 444.

¹³² KSA: 13:14[29] = WLN, pp. 242-244/WP: 373.

¹³³ KSA: 13:14[226] = WLN, p. 267/WP: 68.

¹³⁴ Another factor might be inconsistency on Nietzsche's part. The traits of altruism and objectivity that are essential to his depiction of Spencer are both due to a disgregation of the will. (See *TI*: Skirmishes, 35 & KSA: 13:17[6] = WP: 44, and 13:14[83] = WP: 444, respectively.) This is a condition he usually associates more with an 'unruly' rather than a 'typical' decadent as discussed in Chapter 3.3.3. The possibility remains that disgregation is part of the overall process of decadence, as one progresses from one type of decadent to the other.

¹³⁵ CW: 5.

***PART IV: A PHYSIOLOGICAL CONCEPTION
OF DECADENCE***

Chapter 9: The Functioning of Decadence and its Potential Remedies

9.1 Introduction

Throughout this work I have emphasised the physiological basis of decadence, as construed in Nietzsche's expansive sense that also impinges on the psychological, as defined in Chapter 2.2. In this chapter I will supply further arguments in support of this physiological reading, which follows on from the discussion of the causes and effects of decadence in Chapters 3 and 4 respectively. Chapter 4.6 noted that the degree of ambiguity of the term 'decadence' is related to how the psychological effects of decadence also function as a cause of new physiological instances of the phenomenon. Below, I first propose a model that could explain how a physiologically driven process of Nietzsche's conception of decadence may function. Secondly, I explore what Nietzsche claims can be done to combat the phenomenon. Finally, I argue that the only remedy he proposes for decadence is one that is also to an important extent physiological.

9.2 Decadence as an Expansive Physiological Process

Let us briefly return to the ambiguity over the meaning and usage of the term 'decadence' in Nietzsche's writings that I touched upon in Chapter 4.6, and suggest a way of describing how the phenomenon functions. I will begin by drawing attention to the following notebook entry, which I believe has not been given the attention it deserves by commentators:

The decadence moralities have the peculiarity of recommending a practice, a regime, which *accelerates* the decadence . . . – both physiologically and as well as psychologically: the instinct of *repair* and plasticity no longer functions . . .¹

¹ Die Decadence-Moralen haben das eigenthümlich, daß sie eine Praxis, ein Regime, empfehlen, welche die *décadence beschleunigt* . . . – sowohl physiologisch, als psychologisch: der Instinkt der *Reparation* und Plastik fungirt nicht mehr . . . , KSA: 13:14[210] = MT. Cf., A: 6.
Cf., KSA: 13:15[120] = WP: 857.

Using my earlier terminology, the moral values embodied in the practices referred to in this quote are a collective example of psychological-decadence and a product of the underlying physiological-decadence. Such decadent practices we are told, hasten the physiological and subsequent psychological decline that together constitute the overall process of decadence.² It would appear that decadence functions like a vicious circle – as mentioned in Chapter 4.4.2 – in a sequence of reciprocal cause and effect, in which the component parts intensify and aggravate each other, leading inexorably to an exacerbation of the phenomenon in a person.³

Yet a second kind of cyclical behaviour of decadence – we could call it a self-perpetuating spiralling contagion – is also concisely suggested in several notebook entries that will be examined below. These passages indicate that Nietzsche also believes that physiological-decadence functions not only to create psychological values, but that these values themselves go on to cause the same or similar physiological and psychological effects in *other people*. Decadence's contagion behaves analogous to that of a biological or computer virus, in that it is both self-replicating and self-propagating. By 'self-replicating', I mean that the emergent phenomenon has the potential to generate a duplicate instance of itself by the way it interacts with a suitable environment. By 'self-propagating', I mean the likelihood is that this duplication will further multiply through a mechanism of transmission without any overt assistance or coercion by an external agent or force. In the case of Nietzsche's expansive conception of decadence, the suitable environment is the life-inhibiting culture favoured by those of weak physiological constitution. Such a culture – together with the accompanying debilitating physiological consequences for its members – is propagated and perpetuated via imitation, influence or habit rather than obvious coercion or force.

Such a causal model of Nietzsche's conception of decadence is therefore not just a self-reinforcing vicious circle, it is also dynamically cyclical in nature: it begins for Nietzsche with the

² This entry is one of only a handful of times that Nietzsche spells 'decadence' without an acute *aigu* accent. This could simply be a diacritical error, or possibly indicate that he is trying to make a distinction by referring to a particular instance of something that encapsulates decadence rather than the process itself. Cf., "[A] *decadence form of music*"; ([E]ine *Decadence-Form der Musik*), KSA: 13:11[322] = MT, & "This nihilistic religion gathers together those decadence elements (*die Decadence-Elemente*) and the like that it finds in antiquity", KSA: 13:11[371] = WP: 153.

³ In Nietzsche's view suffering gives rise to values and moralities that lead to certain practices, where the latter are intended to explain and reduce the suffering, but usually merely expedites it in the long run.

physiological basis of decadence – a disorder of drives and instincts – and moves onward to the psychological product – life inhibiting values embodying or encapsulating the disorder, such as those of Christianity.⁴ The proliferation of such values – as described by the example of the Christian recipe for decadence in Chapter 1.3.4 – are detrimental in Nietzsche’s eyes as they induce further instances of decadence. For the effect of these values is instilling or exacerbating physiological-decadence in others – as we saw in the example of Pascal in Chapter 6.2 – and so on in an iterative fashion. Indeed the impact of an ardent Christian like Pascal is not only for the cycle of decadence to continue through replication, but also to evolve. For his famous wager that states it is only rational justified to believe and live as if God exists, assists in goading those struggling with by the enormity of life into adopting or sustaining a specific kind of ascetic Christian faith, thereby resulting in the furtherance of decadence. The self-replicating and self-propagating nature of decadence is readily detectable in the following notebook entry:

[T]he old values born of declining and the new ones of ascending life—that all the old ideals are hostile to life (born of decadence and agents of decadence (*und die Décadence bestimmend*),⁵ even if in the magnificent Sunday clothes of morality).⁶

One interpretation of this passage is that the old life-inhibiting ideals of morality are instances of what I have called psychological-decadence, and they are not just ‘born’ – which is to say – a product of physiological-decadence, they are also an ‘agent’ for it. In other words, psychological-decadence acts as a vehicle or instrument for the further propagation of physiological-decadence. This notion is reiterated in another notebook entry: “Morality as decadence . . . disintegrates and undermines all actual instincts . . . We see at work before us a dreadful tool of decadence”.⁷

I will now attempt to clarify what I mean by this dynamic cyclical process in more detail by using as a starting point, two questions Nietzsche raises in a notebook entry: “Question: why did life,

⁴ This model incidentally supports Nietzsche’s concerns that the concepts of cause and effect are each usually deemed as separable and stable, and then used in a reductive and mechanical way to provide supposed explanations based on those two terms. Rather he claims each causal event is really a potentially infinite number of processes, which reflect his preference for a belief in perpetual becoming over being. See: *BGE*: 21 & *GS*: 112.

⁵ Literally: ‘and determining the decadence’.

⁶ *KSA*: 13:11[150] = *WP*: 56.

⁷ *Moral als Décadence*, *KSA*: 13:14[154] = *MT/WP*: 584.

physiological well-constitutedness (*Wohlgerathenheit*) everywhere succumb? Why was there no affirmative philosophy, no affirmative religion?"⁸ Since Nietzsche does not elaborate on the specific circumstances and timeframe that led humanity to its weakened physiological constitution that allowed the values of the weak to proliferate over those of the strong, the following exposition should be seen as a *simplified abstraction* of what I take his general position to be.⁹ Over time, the debilitating effects of civilization and the internal turmoil of struggling with a bad conscience causes many individuals to suffer due to a weakened physical constitution. They are weak because as selves they lack order and unity and do not constitute a physiologically and psychologically integrated whole. It is such individuals that Nietzsche describes as decadent. A decadent individual creates or adopts a certain value as their means of coping with the realities of a life of suffering. Such values – a product and expression of their weaknesses – are subsequently found to be appealing to others of a similar constitution and need. The effect of the prevalence of these values is the triggering, sustaining, or even furthering of the weakening condition of disunity and disorder – the decadence – in others and subsequent generations, such that the latter also degenerate. Life-inhibiting values and a disposition to create other values like it then become embedded in the prevailing culture.¹⁰ The result is that the original and subsequent values, together with the culture that now also sustains them, become instances – one might say embodiments or encapsulations – of 'decadence'. Nietzsche makes this general point in the following notebook entry:

⁸ KSA: 13:14[137] = WP: 401.

⁹ Acharya (2014), Chapter 4, offers an account for this process that includes a discussion of the role of the corruption of instincts. Another good example is Nietzsche's depiction of the changing relationship between the Jews and their God, Yahweh that is stimulated by the influence of the priest and their conception of sin. Nietzsche summarizes the adoption of the resulting morality as "physiological ailments poisoned with the worm of conscience", A: 25.

¹⁰ If my portrayal of Nietzsche's conception of decadence is correct, then it would appear to function in a similar manner to Richard Dawkins conception of a meme. A meme for Dawkins is the unit of information found in cultural transmission, which is replicated in an analogous manner to a genetic transmission and evolution, propagating from one mind to another through imitation. Examples of a meme vary enormously but include words, music, visual images, styles of clothing, facial or hand gestures, skills, religious beliefs, tunes and catch-phrases. Briefly put then, pernicious cultural traits 'infect' people's minds in the manner of a kind of theory of mind viruses, although Dawkins (2006), p. 192, himself appears to regard memes as not just a psychological entity but also containing a physiological element as well: "As my colleague N. K. Humphrey neatly summed up an earlier draft of this chapter: ' . . . memes should be regarded as living structures, not just metaphorically but technically. When you plant a fertile meme in my mind you literally parasitize my brain, turning it into a vehicle for the meme's propagation in just the way that a virus may parasitize the genetic mechanism of a host cell. And this isn't just a way of talking—the meme for, say, "belief in life after death" is actually realized physically, millions of times over, as a structure in the nervous systems of individual men the world over.'"

To understand: That all kinds of decay and sickening have continually contributed to overall value judgements: that in the value judgements which have come to dominate, decadence has even gained ascendancy: that we not only have to struggle against the states resulting from all the present misery of degeneration, but that *all* the previous decadence has remained as a residue, i.e., *alive*. Such an aberration of the whole of mankind from its fundamental instincts, such a decadence of the whole of value judgement, is the question mark par excellence, the real riddle the animal called 'man' sets the philosopher –¹¹

As we shall see in the next section, if decadence is construed as an expansive physiological process that self-replicates and self-propagates, this may explain why Nietzsche claims that most likely the only hypothetical cure is one that is physiological.

9.3 Combatting and Remediating Decadence

In Chapter 5.1 I drew attention to the scope of the effect of decadence. Nietzsche claims it affects almost everyone, probably for a significant portion of their lives.¹² He further claims that most likely the only hypothetical cure is one that is physiological, because this is the only way to address the underlying causes of decadence. For as we saw in Chapter 2.2, values for Nietzsche – including decadent ones – are often involuntary expressions of unconscious physiological forces:

[T]herapeutic methods, the psychological, moral ones, don't change the course of decadence, they do not halt it, they are physiologically *null*: insight into the *great nullity* of these arrogant 'reactions': they are forms of narcotisation against certain pernicious consequences, they don't get rid of the morbid element: they are often heroic attempts to annul the man of decadence, to minimise his *harmful effect*.¹³

I will below suggest an interpretation of what this hypothetical cure may look like. For now we just need to note that Nietzsche seems to be suggesting that it is probably impossible for an individual to

¹¹ KSA: 13:11[227] = *WLN*, p. 234/*WP*: 39.

¹² KSA: 13:14[182] = *WP*: 864.

¹³ KSA: 13:14[86] = *WLN*, pp. 248-249/*WP*: 43. Cf., KSA: 13:14[155] = *WP*: 233.

escape decadence, and at best resist and possibly mitigate its effects – possibly assuming one is aware of its presence in the first place¹⁴ – and to attempt to do so should be part of life in general.¹⁵ In one particularly unpalatable passage from *Twilight to the Idols*, Nietzsche even recommends to pessimists and other like-minded decadents who wish they had never been born, that “[w]hen you *do away with* yourself you are doing the most admirable thing there is”.¹⁶ He continues by advocating what we would now refer to as medically assisted suicide for those too weak to resist decadence on their own.¹⁷ Yet Nietzsche’s position is unstable. He also claims in another passage from the same book that “[w]hat doesn’t kill me makes me stronger”, so decadence as a physiological disorder with psychological consequences can be an essential and necessary factor in self-creation.¹⁸ For according to Nietzsche’s own structural analogy, to attempt to simply eradicate all weak parts is contrary to an assimilation and integration of them into a cohesive whole, which is fundamentally what the ideal of an organic unity requires.¹⁹

Despite occasionally being somewhat upbeat about the possibility that the influence of decadence in late modernity is faltering,²⁰ Nietzsche states in a further passage from *Twilight of the Idols* that “something that we physiologists, at least, do know”, is that the chances for ever reversing or even arresting decadence are extremely slim:

It is no use: we *have to* go forwards, and I mean *step by step further into decadence* (– this is my definition of modern ‘progress’. . .). You can *inhibit* this development and even dam up the degeneration through inhibition, gather it together, make it more violent and *sudden*: but that is all you can do. –²¹

¹⁴ KSA: 13:14[57] = WP: 171 & 13:14[65] = WP: 47.

¹⁵ KSA: 13:11[226] = WLN, pp. 232-234/WP: 339.

¹⁶ TI: Skirmishes, 36.

¹⁷ Moreover, Nietzsche seems to further suggest that this terminal solution could be invoked if caring for the weak would prove too big a burden to the strong, who simply wish to get on with their lives.

¹⁸ TI: Arrows, 8.

¹⁹ GS: 290.

²⁰ KSA: 12:9[35] = WLN, pp. 146-147/WP: 13 & 13:11[366] = WP: 239.

²¹ TI: Skirmishes, 43.

If my analysis of decadence is correct, then I take Nietzsche here to argue that in order to arrest or reverse the advance of decadence, peoples or cultures would ultimately have to purge themselves of their bad conscience, which is perhaps not something that they can simply choose to do? Moreover, Nietzsche is extremely weary of the enormity of such a task. The ancient Greeks, he argues, forestalled the pain of a bad conscience by not conceptualising it as guilt. Rather they redirected their aggressive drives via the contest or *agōn*, into socially acceptable and productive activities, and by the deification of the animality within man that stands in stark contrast to the aversion of it by Christianity.²² Again, in *Twilight of the Idols*, Nietzsche tells us what he sees as the only possible solution to decadence:

It is crucial for the fate of individuals as well as peoples that culture begin in the *right* place – *not* in the 'soul' (which was the disastrous superstition of priests and half-priests): the right place is the body, gestures, diet, physiology, *everything else* follows from this . . .²³

This quote appears as part of Nietzsche's allusion to the following kind of potential scenario. Only a community of people "who do not 'let themselves go'", by distancing themselves from the company of decadents and their values, and the resulting instinctive self-destructive behaviour, may nurture a more cohesive internalised structure of the body. Over the course of a number of generations, this gradual physiological refinement could then possibly lead to the emergence of stronger and more flourishing individuals.²⁴ This would presumably be a type of person who has mastered the capacity to integrate as many powerful and conflicting drives and affects as possible, such that they self-organise and integrate into a coherent unity of power, as discussed albeit briefly in Chapter 5.3 using the exemplar of Goethe. Only a few individuals with a formidable constitution – where also the instinct of repair and plasticity mentioned in the quote above is intact – can produce the new life-stimulating values required to initiate a future culture of self-empowerment that purges a bad conscience, and nurtures personal and ultimately cultural flourishing for all. Such a development

²² *GM*: II, 23 & *TI*: Skirmishes, 47.

²³ *TI*: Skirmishes, 47.

²⁴ *TI*: Skirmishes, 47.

may ultimately provide the means to rejuvenate humanity's inhibited animality, and propel everyone in their own idiosyncratic and authentic drive for freedom using the values of life-affirming culture as their guide.

As Nietzsche does not subscribe to a belief in humanity's inherent natural goodness like Rousseau,²⁵ he therefore ridicules the latter's perceived call for "a 'return to nature'", in favour of a progressive "*coming-towards*", or ascent to, "a high, free, even terrible nature and naturalness". What Nietzsche seems to in mind is a people revitalised by the newly cultivated unity of their animality and humanity, having grown out of the prejudices imposed by a crude and coercive civilization as outlined in Chapter 3.3.1.²⁶ The suggestion is that one possible prospective cure for decadence could be via the cultivation of 'well-turned-out' people of rare genius and true greatness,²⁷ who, following in the mould of Goethe, assists in the establishment of a culture for humanity's flourishing.²⁸ I believe this scenario is compatible with the view that decadence is an expansive physiological process that is self-replicating and self-propagating. For if the physiological constitution of a given individual largely determines the nature of the values created by them and potentially adopted by others, then any reversal and forward direction of the cyclical process of decadence presupposes the following proviso: in order to change the nature of future values to something more life affirming, the determining physiological composition of humanity first has to be transformed to one of an underlying strength that exhibits vibrancy and resolve.²⁹ Once the latter has been accomplished, the resulting life-affirming values may eventually induce the flourishing of others, through the self-replication and self-propagation of physiological-based values.³⁰

²⁵ KSA: 12:9[184] = WP: 100.

²⁶ TI: Skirmishes, 48.

²⁷ Huddleston (2019) argues that Nietzsche is essentially a social thinker who views culture as a collective social achievement of prime importance in its own right, such that great individuals are not all that matters.

²⁸ TI: Skirmishes, 49-51.

²⁹ This conception of 'strength' encompasses the physically frail but tenaciously motivated, such as Stephen Hawking.

³⁰ Such an interpretation may add credence to the view that Nietzsche is a kind of proto-Nazi. I believe this is clearly not the case given his highly disparaging views on (German) Nationalism, and such accusations largely stem from his careless and deliberately incendiary language, which is also partly a product of the contemporary debates on race and evolution.

Nevertheless, in Nietzsche's opinion to attempt a rejuvenation of humanity's animality is now a near impossible task. For he asks just who exactly would have the required strength to undo two millennia of cultural suppression of humanity's animal nature, to turn this "evil eye" against itself and galvanize the bad conscience into the service of the "natural inclinations"?³¹ It is Nietzsche's conviction that his own era of modernity is surely deficient in the necessary personalities and means to realize such a redeeming undertaking from within, as epitomised by the inherent failings of contemporary and past German culture.³² Nietzsche cites two squandered attempts within recent European history to do just this. The penultimate occasion coincided with what Nietzsche calls "the last *great age*"³³ – that of the Renaissance –³⁴ which he portrays in the following way:

The *revaluation of all Christian values* an attempt using all means, all instincts, all genius, to allow the *opposite* values, *noble* values to triumph . . . Attacking at the decisive spot, at the seat of Christianity itself, putting *noble* values on the throne, I mean into the instincts, *inside* the most basic needs and desires of the people sitting there . . .³⁵

This quote, that stresses the need to redress humanity's instincts, is indicative of Nietzsche's belief that decadence can perhaps be remedied by at least in part a physiological approach – which in this case – ultimately fails. The next opportunity arose with the prospect of a unified Europe under Napoleon when "a *force majeure* [superior force] of genius and will became visible on the bridge between two centuries of decadence".³⁶ Nietzsche claims both opportunities were thwarted by the German trait for idealism that denigrates the world as inferior in preference to a metaphysical 'true world'.³⁷ The first chance was foiled by Luther's reformation that "*re-established the church*" and put an end to the overcoming of a corrupted Christianity by "[t]he triumph of life". Consequently the Renaissance turned into "a meaningless event, a great *In Vain!*" that was subsequently further

³¹ *GM*: II, 24. *Cf.*, *KSA*: Not included = *WP*: 295.

³² *TI*: Germans, 4.

³³ *TI*: Skirmishes, 37 & *EH*: CW, 2.

³⁴ Although for Nietzsche, "we have not yet reattained the man of the Renaissance, and the man of the Renaissance, in turn, is inferior to the man of antiquity), *KSA*: 12:10[111] = *WP*: 881.

³⁵ *A*: 61.

³⁶ *EH*: CW, 2.

³⁷ *EH*: CW, 1 & 2.

undermined by the philosophies of Leibniz and Kant that in their own ways perpetuated the Lutheran tradition.³⁸ The second chance was stymied by the rise of German nationalism and resistance to Napoleon in the so-called German ‘wars of liberation’, that ultimately led to the unification and founding of the (second) Reich.³⁹ Nietzsche conveys nothing but an aura of despair in his depiction of the folly of all contemporary moral and political schemes designed to reverse or cure the prevailing decadence, particularly the ascendancy of nationalism,⁴⁰ democracy,⁴¹ liberalism⁴² and socialism.⁴³ All that a decadent era – such as the one of modernity – can do is take the almost inexorable path towards the inevitable exhaustion of its vital resources, for any attempt to do otherwise will merely hasten the process of degeneration:

Philosophers and moralists are lying to themselves when they think that they are going to extricate themselves from decadence by waging war on it. Extrication is not in their power: what they choose as a remedy, as an escape, is itself only another expression of decadence – they *change* the way it is expressed but do not get rid of the thing itself.⁴⁴

9.3 Conclusion

In this chapter I have done nothing more than outlined a model to explain the functioning of decadence for Nietzsche as essentially a physio-psychological process that is not only self-enforcing, but also self-replicating and self-propagating. Such a model I believe helps to explain the ambiguous manner in which he uses the terminology of decadence. In Chapter 1.5, I stated that Douglas Burnham is mistaken to say that degeneration tends to have a stronger physiological emphasis than decadence. Brian Leiter’s use of type facts, on the other hand, gestures towards the right approach, but does not capture the full complexity of the phenomenon as one that self-replicates and self-

³⁸ A: 61.

³⁹ EH: CW, 2, TI: Germans, 4 & A: 61.

⁴⁰ EH: CW, 2.

⁴¹ TI: Skirmishes, 39-40 & KSA: 12:2[13] = WLN, pp. 67-69/WP: 954.

⁴² TI: Skirmishes, 38 & A: 38.

⁴³ TI: Skirmishes, 37 & 50 & A: 57.

⁴⁴ TI: Socrates, 11.

propagates. Needless to say, much more needs to be done to substantiate this reading and work out the complex interrelationship between the physiological and the psychological and cultural factors. The second half of this chapter explored Nietzsche's claims about what can be done to resist or arrest the phenomenon of decadence, which is in many ways surprisingly pessimistic in its general outlook. I offer an interpretation that the only cure Nietzsche hints at is a physiological one, and that this is compatible with decadence functioning in the above described self-perpetuating manner. However, the chances of this cure materialising – at least in the immediate future of humanity – he regarded as very slim indeed.

Chapter 10: Conclusion

In this study I endeavoured to fill a gap in the current Nietzsche scholarship, by providing a concise account of Nietzsche's challenging conception of decadence. In this concluding chapter, I will summarise the key findings of my analysis by returning to my two main objectives as stated in the introduction. First, to examine what exactly Nietzsche means by decadence. Secondly, to assess when and where the conception of decadence makes a perceptible appearance in Nietzsche's oeuvre, and to elucidate how the phenomenon functions as an organizing principle and significant philosophical term in his philosophy. I will begin by summarising our understanding of the term 'decadence'.

Chapter 1 showed that in general terms decadence can be construed as a kind of internal disorder and disunity, consisting of anarchic or tyrannized parts that results in a failing organism bereft of vitality. A successful organism, by contrast, is a cohesive and energised entity because a dominant, coordinating element steers the component parts to function in unison. For Nietzsche, the right kind of non-reductive unity brings wholeness and with it health, whereas disunity leads to fragmentation and sickness.¹ Hence, he makes the distinction between 'complete' (*vollständige*) people and those that are 'fragments' (*Bruchstücke*),² which he later also applies to entire epochs of human history and development.³ What I believe to be crucial to reaching an understanding of Nietzsche's conception of decadence is its physiological basis. A life-inhibiting physiological condition – which in Nietzsche expansive sense of physiology entails associated detrimental psychological consequences – is *the* prime example of disunity, and what he *principally* means by the term 'decadence'. This physiological disunity and resulting disorder entails that an individual's drives and instincts develop into a weak constitution. As a result the individual struggles to face up to life's

¹ CW: 7.

² KSA: 11:26[243], 11:26[258] & 11:35[74] Cf., Z: II, Redemption, TI: Germans, 3 & EH: Z, 8.

³ KSA: 12:10[111] = WP: 881.

challenges. It is for that reason that the meaning of decadence ultimately also becomes associated with adversity to life.

I stated in the introduction that Nietzsche can be construed as offering at best an incomplete theory of decadence, and he only once refers to it as a ‘theory’ in a notebook entry.⁴ As was shown in Chapter 2, he also only once explicitly refers to a method⁵ for exposing the phenomenon, again, only in a notebook.⁶ The method is also tacitly reiterated in two passages in his published works.⁷ The reasoning employed in the method proceeds in an abductive fashion, from the observation that the values and ideals that are embodied in the practices adopted by a majority of people, are best explained as their response to a life they see as predicament, replete with suffering. Nietzsche interprets the latter behaviour as symptomatic of weakness and an inherent aversion to life. Such flaws are due to an individual’s deficiencies in energy, motivation and ability to resist the life of adversity, which is explained using an expansive conception of physiology that also impinges upon the psychological.

In Chapter 2 I argued that a recognisable and convincing theory would be one that is a validated hypothesis, verified through further reasoning and testing, and which provides the best explanation for the identified phenomenon. Yet these key criteria of a successful theory are missing in Nietzsche’s exposition of decadence, which he tries to corroborate further by using his own case of decadence. Potentially, he thereby creates a problem of self-referentiality. I further argued that what we are presented with is a hypothesis that, in order to count as established, would be in need of further verification and validation. I also noted that this may well be intentional, as Nietzsche is possibly more interested in developing a new kind of philosophical psychology than defending a specific theory of decadence. When Nietzsche states that humanity “has only been *taught*

⁴ KSA: 13:14[77].

⁵ KSA: 13:17[6] = WP: 44.

⁶ KSA: 13:14[77].

⁷ NCW: Antipodes & GS: 370. Cf., GM: Preface, 3.

decadence values, and *only* decadence values, as the highest values”,⁸ his conception of decadence is evidently integral to exposing the present ascendancy of life-inhibiting values, and providing the rationale for his demands for new values or a revaluation of all values (*Umwertung aller Werthe*) that will then allow humanity to flourish.⁹ Hence, his attempts to re-orientate humanity’s direction seem to presuppose some sort of theory that proves the existence of decadent values and explains how they function. Significant effort is required to describe his theory of decadence before one can evaluate its coherence and credibility. As I have argued, there are perhaps too many difficulties with Nietzsche’s conception to, be considered it successful or established. I consider the latter entirely in keeping with Nietzsche’s overall philosophical aims.

As I argued in Chapter 3, the *immediate cause* of decadence is a physiological disorder, with Nietzsche conceptualising the resulting deficiencies as a lack of will to power. I determined that the *underlying cause* of this disorder lies in debilitating influences of the rise of civil society, and this in turn gives rise to an *intermediate cause*, which is humanity’s development of a bad conscience. Nietzsche portrays the latter as the expression of humanity suffering from itself, by having to suppress its remaining animalistic instincts due to the oppressive demands of civil society. However, the causes of decadence are never clearly elucidated by Nietzsche, or indeed ever presented in such terms. Whilst his notion of will to power changes across his later oeuvre, the role of civilization and bad conscience as additional causes of decadence are only discernible *explicitly* in his notebooks, with only corresponding *implicit* accounts in his published works. Such factors only serve to add opacity to the precise causal role of will to power, bad conscience and civilization in his overall conception of decadence.

In Chapter 4, which examined the effects of decadence, we saw further confirmation of Nietzsche’s methodological supposition. Rather than embracing life including its inherent and perennial obstacles and resistances, an individual’s focus is instead orientated by a need to alleviate

⁸ EH: Destiny, 7.

⁹ A: 13, EH: HH, 6, D, 1, GM & Destiny, 1.

the suffering through alcohol, or the adoption of narcotic or palliative values and ideals, be they Christian moral value, or for example, *ataraxia*. Using alcohol as a means to temporally blot out life's troubles is an obvious example of this kind of behaviour, and as we saw in Chapter 1.3, Nietzsche explicitly refers to alcoholism as a consequence of decadence.¹⁰ It is for this reason that I have used alcohol throughout this work as an analogy to explain the workings of the phenomenon of decadence. Even in the example of alcoholism the four effects of decadence that I identified in Chapter 4 – psychological, epistemological, metaphysical, and agential weakness – can be described. A life in which alcohol is prized such that it overrides all else is a form of psychological weakness, one where the addicted person can no longer evaluate his situation or simply disregards the known dangers of its abuse. Alcohol is one – and for most people – the most easily available way to blot out reality for the ideal of oblivion, with the consequence that the alcoholic becomes a weak agent who lacks, and increasingly loses control as they are governed by their addiction.

In Chapters 5 to 8, I subsequently took the four effects of decadence as discussed in Chapter 4, and applied them as a set of criteria to some exemplar decadents, to determine if they reveal the identified attributes of weakness. The underlying physiological disorder is exhibited in many forms of psychological weakness, but a critical consequence is that it inhibits one's ability to question knowledge claims and values. This is particularly applicable to those beliefs that favour the pursuit of illusory ideals pertaining to an after-life, rather than advancing new ones more fitting to one's own needs and flourishing. The consequence is that one's agency is restricted by the holding of inappropriate, imposed beliefs with supposed universal applicability. The resulting portrayals of exemplar decadents shows that Nietzsche seems to consider *each* of the four attributes of weakness most likely to be *necessary*, as each *alone* does not make a decadent. Even though Nietzsche uses the terminology of decadence in an imprecise and ambiguous way, these four attributes are strong contenders for acting as jointly *sufficient* conditions: for Nietzsche to class someone as a decadent seems to require *all* of them in some shape or form. This is not to say that Nietzsche cares much

¹⁰ KSA: 13:14[73] = WP: 42.

about establishing the sufficient conditions for the application of a concept to phenomena. Nevertheless, I have shown that one can discern these four attributes of weakness in each of my chosen exemplars of decadence.

We saw in Chapter 5, that in contrast to Wagner – an archetypal decadent in general, but the epitome of a decadent artist in particular¹¹ – a strong, flourishing individual for Nietzsche as personified by the example of Goethe, excels by integrating as many powerful and conflicting drives and affects as possible, such that they self-organise and synthesize into a coherent unity of power. The internal constitution of the strong is cultivated through another form of integration. A life-affirming culture of empowerment can provide the right kind of life-stimulating values, which the ‘well-turned-out’ type can then further augment through the creation of new values.¹² By contrast, in a decadent culture like that of modernity¹³ – “an age of disintegration” – the weaker person according to Nietzsche “will have the legacy of multiple lineages in his body, which means conflicting . . . drives and value standards that fight with each other and rarely leave each other alone.”¹⁴ As we have seen with my chosen exemplar decadents, the weaker person wishes only to bring an end to this battle, giving in to one tyrannical drive rather than allowing an anarchical drive configuration to persist. I identified a distinction Nietzsche makes between two contrasting types of decadents that both possess the four attributes of weakness, but to differing degrees – the ‘unruly’ and the ‘typical’ type. We saw that Nietzsche makes this distinction because he believes few people persists as ‘unruly’ decadents, incapacitated by their anarchic drives, and dithering over or agonised by possible ideals that may shape their lives. Rather, through the emergence of a dominant drive, the majority adopt a solution which they not only *embrace*, but also *endorse* and *promote* as a law applicable to all. As they do so, they become a ‘typical’ decadent. This is why the exemplar decadents I have examined are all portrayed by Nietzsche as on a quest for a single tranquillising and

¹¹ CW: 5.

¹² CW: Epilogue.

¹³ TI: Skirmishes, 50, EH: CW, 2 & KSA: 13:11[366] = WP: 239.

¹⁴ BGE: 200.

pacifying panacea of one type or another, that will bring them rest, peace and happiness. For Wagner, this is redemption, for Pascal, Christian salvation, for Pyrrho and Epicurus, the state of serene calmness of *ataraxia*, and for Spencer, the certainty of objective science.

In order to consolidate my physiologically based interpretation of decadence, in Chapter 9 I offered a speculative model of the functioning of this phenomenon as an expansive physiological process, a process which is not only self-reinforcing, but also self-replicating and self-propagating. Its complexity – particularly the way it is embedded into the individual-cultural dynamic as described in Chapter 1 – helps to explain the ambiguity of Nietzsche's use of the term decadence. The physiological conception, explains why Nietzsche believes that any cure for decadence would also have to be at least in part physiological. And yet, why should decadence and its hypothetical cures matter? Recall that in *The Anti-Christ* Nietzsche is clear why he regarded decadence as supremely important:

[It is] my claim that all the values in which humanity has collected its highest desiderata are *values of decadence*.¹⁵

In evaluating whether any of us should be worried about this potentially disconcerting claim, the first step was to better understand what Nietzsche means by decadent. This is what I have tried to do here. The real engagement with Nietzsche's claim — whether it ever applied or perhaps still applies, and its practical refutations — has yet to come.

¹⁵ A: 6.

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